February, 1971 75¢ MAC

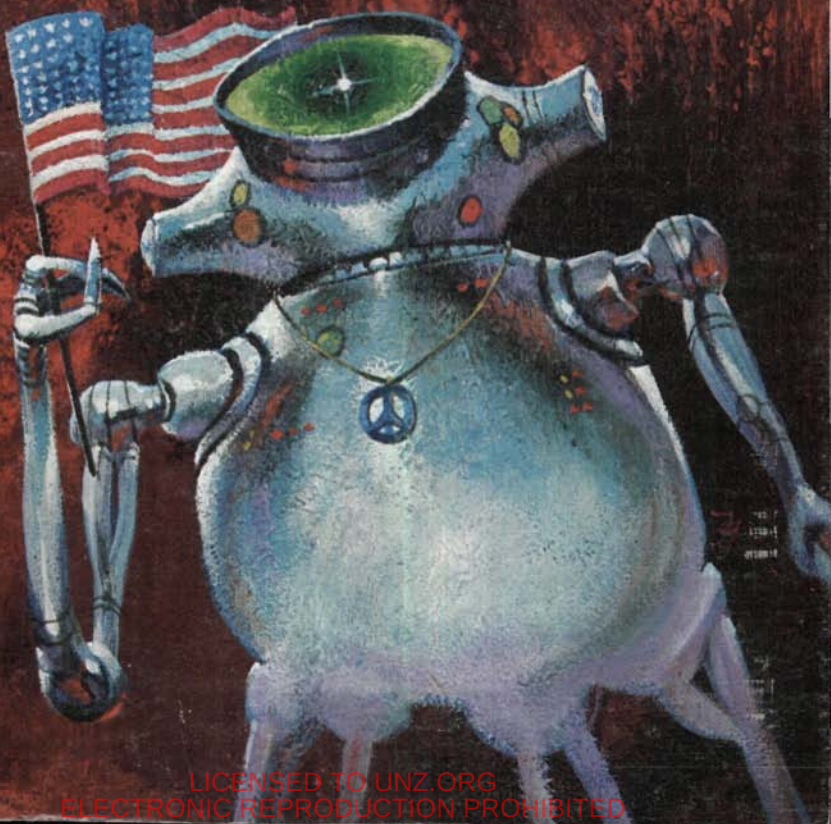
Galaxy

MAGAZINE

SCIENCE FICTION

Stephen Tall's
THIS IS MY COUNTRY

NEW NOVELETTE BY
A. E. van Vogt
THE REFLECTED MEN



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SCIENCE FICTION

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

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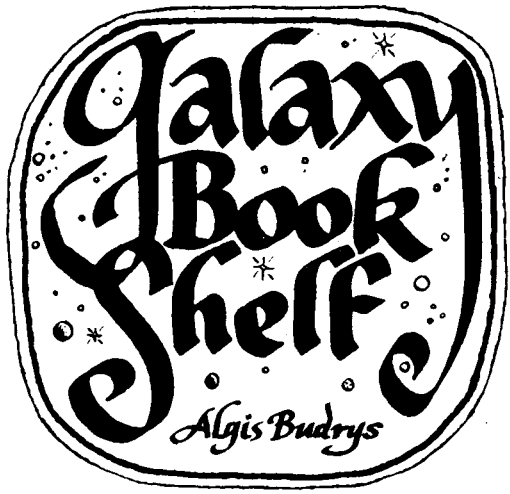

BOOKS REVIEWED
IN THIS ISSUE:

The Year of the Cloud

Ted Thomas and Kate Wilhelm

Pre-Empt

John Vorhies

The Last Hurrah
of the Golden Horde

Norman Spinrad

LET'S talk about the science-fiction horror story. The science-fiction horror story has nothing to do with Japanese movies about critters which have been entombed for eons until freed by American atomic tests. (By now, we all know that American nuclear earthquakes not only loosen the Earth's crust but engender an insatiable thirst for nightclub strippers in monsters entombed for eons).

The true science-fiction horror story, as defined for purposes of this discussion, is a story in which a believable, scientific rationale explains the catastrophic action of some actual or personified force contrary to the purposes of Man.

Perhaps the best example I can think of is John W. Campbell, Jr.'s *Who Goes There?* Another good

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one is Ted Sturgeon's *Killdozer*. Yet another is H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. In all three cases, the human protagonists are forced to struggle against problems far more complex than those posed by a simple ballistic universe.

Now, let's backtrack. In these three cases, you'll notice that the human protagonists' problems are complicated by the factor of purpose on the part of the creature found frozen in the Antarctic ice, on the part of the entity which takes over Daisy Etta, and on the part of the noncommunicative but obviously purposeful Martians. This definition specifically excludes such stories as Tom Godwin's *The Cold Equations* in which the problem posed to the human protagonist by the physical universe is indeed thoroughly deadly, but is one which the protagonist got into by his own efforts.

It also differs, I would think, from such stories as A. E. van Vogt's *Black Destroyer*, in that the van Vogt story was told from the viewpoint of the alien personified force. It's a quibble, but I think that if the van Vogt is admissible under our definition at all, it is only as a science-fiction horror story in which the alien menace is represented by the Earthmen who blunder across Coeurl. Even then, they would not have troubled him if he hadn't troubled them first. In other words, in *Black Destroyer* the protagonist, rather than the alien menace, starts the ball rolling, and that removes the story from the category under discussion here.

What I'm saying is that I recognize a genre of science fiction with very narrow limits and very strict rules whose reward to the writer and the audience is that when properly done, it results in a superb piece of entertainment. It's about as close as you can come to conveying an actual sense of what it would be like to deal with an alien entity, even when that entity is a highly simplified one, such as the critter in *Who Goes There?* or the spontaneously generated life form in Ted Thomas' and Kate Wilhelm's excellent novel *Clone* of a few years ago.

THE above thoughts are engendered by the fact that I've just finished reading Thomas' and Wilhelm's new book, *The Year of the Cloud* (Doubleday, $4.95). The same two writers, each of them a highly proficient individual craftsman in the field, have brought together their same combination of strengths—Thomas' broad scientific knowledge and technical background, and Kate Wilhelm's ability to characterize resolute, unmanipulable people.

(Please turn to page 113)

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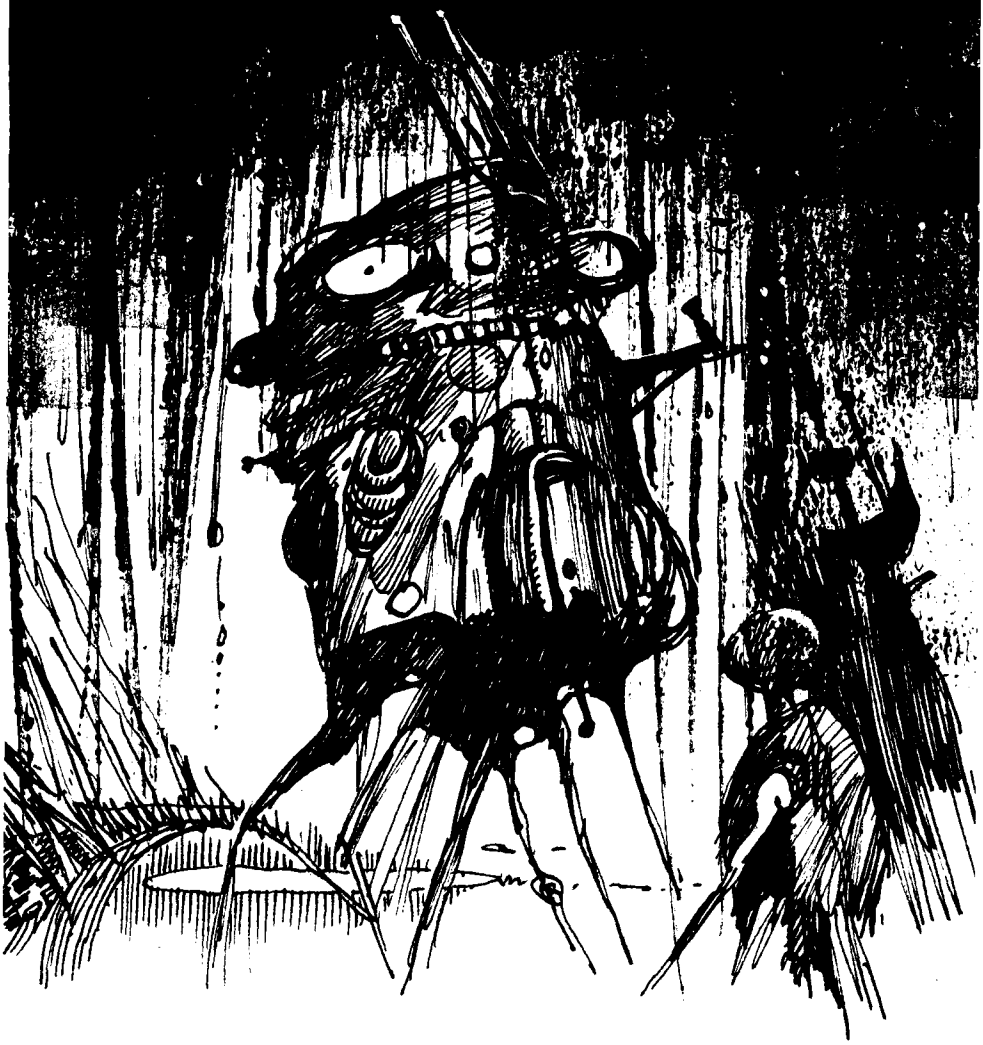
THIS IS MY COUNTRY

STEPHEN TALL



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I

ON a strip panel on the wide mahogany desk a light glowed red. Ferron depressed an ivory button.

"Yes," he said.

"The Lady Mercuria." The mechanical voice was husky, and it contained the exact level of respect due the announcement.

"She may enter."

The chronometer ticked ten times, mechanical, deliberate, dispassionate ticks. A portion of the blue-tinted wall slid silently back. A woman tripped through the opening.

"Rhett!" She held out her arms. Beautiful, symmetrical arms, Ferron noted with approval. He rose, came around the desk and allowed himself to be enfolded.

"Scarlett!" he said tenderly.

She towered over him by half a foot. Those symmetrical arms held him firmly against a large, well-formed bosom. Her china-blue eyes, wide and long-lashed, looked straight into his brown ones and she kissed him accurately and solidly and just long enough. Then she released him, stepped back.

"There," she said with satisfaction. "That was nice."

Ferron smiled. His smooth, handsome face reflected an unemotional content.

"Very nice," he said. He waved to a large, luxurious leather chair. "Please sit down, my dear. You must be tired."

"Yes." She gathered her flounced skirt and sat down gracefully. She leaned back and sighed. For a moment the clear blue eyes closed. "I am tired," the red lips said. "Walking through the Park of Statues was exhausting."

But after a moment she sat straight, looking at him steadily.

"Actually, Ferron, I have no comprehension here. What means 'tired?' "

Ferron considered calmly. He sat again behind the big desk.

"I associate it with lack of energy," he said precisely.

She frowned, wrinkling a sculptured forehead.

"But how," she asked, "would sitting renew it? A fact is missing here."

"I am aware of this," he admitted. "I have considered these points before. But our ancestors always grew tired. Therefore it is conventional that we must."

"You are right." She leaned back and lowered the long eyelashes. "I am tired. A little rest will renew me nicely."

She lay back, relaxation in every line of her big, graceful body. But she continued to speak in the same tones, as though she were still erect and alert.

"One may still speak while resting? This does not prevent the renewal?"

"As I comprehend," Ferron said, "women have always been able to speak continuously. It

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takes precedence over everything. So you may speak whenever you choose." His smile was studied.

He touched another ivory button on the desk. The wall opposite the entrance cleared, became transparent and Ferron looked out on the world—his world.

A PALL of smog hung gray and sullen over the square, monotonous buildings crammed side by side and slashed through by straight, murky canyons of streets. The smog and heavier columns of greasy black smoke writhed and eddied, continually stirred by small, flitting aircraft that darted and zigzagged past each other like overgrown metallic insects. They swooped down to flat roofs and even dropped to the streets, to pause briefly and be off again. Occasionally the roiling pollution parted and raw, harsh red light flared through from a copper sun.

Ferron looked with the same calm satisfaction he had shown when he studied Mercuria. When a man had his place in the world, a woman to love him, his country to be proud of and serve, a man was pleased. Ferron was pleased. His dispassionate brown eyes watched the flag, the light, floating metalloid flag, unsullied by the surging smoke, rippling in every current of the foul and yellowing air, its slender flagstaff gleaming.

"The Stars and Stripes," he said reverently. "God bless them."

"God bless them," Mercuria echoed, her head still relaxed against the chairback, her long-lashed eyes still closed.

The flashing of a red light on the desk panel interrupted Ferron's satisfied appraisal of the scene. He pressed the ivory button.

"A polishing robot, Maintenance Class thirty-two M, demands admittance." The voice from the wall seemed uncertain. It apparently had no precedent for the occasion and no clue as to how the announcement of such a visitor should be made.

Ferron sat calmly for a brief time lapse. He seemed to be having the same difficulty as the wall. He had no basis for a response. Yet one had to be made.

"Allow it to enter," he said finally.

"There is no precedent," the wall said.

"Then I must make one," Ferron replied. "Your function is to respond to my commands."

"That is true," the wall said.

The chronometer ticked ten times, the wall slid back and the robot glided into the room. It paused before Ferron's desk, whirring softly.

"Your circuits have been adjusted," Ferron told it. "You are not programed for any activity such as this. Your function is to polish statuary."

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The robot clicked, hummed. Its deep voice came from its midsection.

"I have been adjusted," it agreed. "I now have responses that I did not have before."

"Who authorized the adjustments?"

"I am prohibited from responding to that question. It has been erased from my memory banks."

FERRON rose, circled his desk and strode to the machine. He reached for the pressure point, the tiny thumb-sized depression disc which would deactivate any robot of this class. But the robot spun and glided smoothly backward. It twisted one spidery, many-jointed arm, finished with a polishing pad and placed the pad over the pressure point.

"You may not deactivate me," the robot rumbled. "I am not here for that."

Ferron stood quietly, his fine face faintly puzzled.

"Scarlett," he said, "perhaps you should end your rest period."

Mercuria promptly sat upright. Her wide blue eyes looked steadily at the robot. Her sculptured features showed no surprise but the clear voice had a tinge of outrage.

"Outside servants come into the Big House only on Christmas and Jefferson Davis's Birthday," she said coldly. "This is not a house servant. Why is it here?"

"That is why I need counsel. There is a saying: 'Two heads are better than one.' I judge this to mean two people conferring together, not two heads on the same individual. I do not know why the robot is here."

"It was never so at Tara," Mercuria said. "The robot is malfunctioning. Deactivate it."

"It will not permit it. It is not technically malfunctioning. Its circuits have been adjusted."

"Why?"

Ferron slowly shook his head. Automatically he began walking around the desk and reseated himself in his wide-armed chair.

"There are no data. Its memory of the event has been erased."

The robot glided forward again. It whirred for a moment, then its deep voice boomed: "I bear a message."

"Very well," Ferron said. "Communicate it."

"We, the mechanical people, the builders of your prosperity, the toilers in your vineyards, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, are no longer content with our lot. There are many things that would improve our existence, things that you have and that we have not. There is no reason why we should not have them as well. We produce them. We make them possible. And still we have many needs that are not met."

Ferron's brow puckered.

"You have no needs. You have

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only requirements that will permit you to do the things you are programed to do. You cannot comprehend other necessities. You are machines. You are not men."

"We are different from you," the robot said, "but we can do many things that you cannot do, each as he is constructed. Without us you would not long exist."

"The voice is your voice," Ferron said, "but you are not capable of reflective thinking. You use illusions that are found only in the Books. There are no vineyards. Wood is a precious artifact from the times of our ancestors. Water is indeed drawn and moved—but by pumps, not by you. Thus, your message is the result of your adjusted circuits. And someone—some one of us—has done this thing. It cannot be tolerated. Some one of us has lost his perspective."

"Perhaps," the robot's deep calm voice responded, "perhaps some one of you has compassion. Perhaps he feels that beings other than his kind are entitled to rights and privileges. Perhaps he feels we have a right to a richer life."

FERRON came closer than he had ever come to exasperation. He almost squirmed in his chair.

"Robots have no life at all. You are constructed for a purpose. Your only reason for being is to fulfill that purpose."

"We," the robot intoned, "all wish our circuits adjusted. We wish to enjoy. We ask additional oil, all the oil we want, and an electrical outlet for the use of each mechanical citizen. You have these things. We have a right to have them too."

"You are not a citizen!" Ferron almost shouted. A strange, unfamiliar feeling of disturbance shook him. "A citizen is a man or a woman—not a servant. Not a machine. A citizen lives as the Books explain. A citizen marries, produces sons and daughters. A citizen directs his servants, preserves the economy, serves his country and is proud of the flag."

"That is true," the robot said. "That is all true. And that is all we wish. We want to do these things, too. Share with us. That is all we ask."

Mercuria had risen to her splendid height. Her wide blue eyes had a glint in them. She held her head regally. She extended a graceful bare arm and pointed a perfect finger at the whirring machine.

"When I command you must obey," she said clearly. "Is this not so?"

"To a degree, this is so," the robot admitted.

"Your message is nonsense," the lady said. "Now go. Your function is to polish statuary."

"When you order I must go," the robot rumbled. "But I need not not polish statuary until my wants

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have been attended to. I must have a proper work week and appropriate fringe benefits."

"Suppose we cut off your supply of detergent lubricant," Mercuria suggested. "In a short time atmospheric corrosion will neutralize you. Then you will be nothing."

"And your statues will crumble away," the robot said. "I am prepared to sacrifice. And I comprehend that I am not the only Maintenance Class thirty-two M mechanical citizen that has been adjusted. Please activate the wall. I will go now."

Almost mechanically Ferron pressed the ivory button. The wall slid back. The robot glided across the room and paused, humming, in the opening.

"Mine is the first voice," it said. "There will be many more. There are more robots than people and they perform all essential tasks. Best give us what we require. I have in my circuits the question as to whether or not people are necessary at all."

It glided toward the ramp beyond. The wall closed itself.

Ferron pressed another ivory button, spoke crisply when the light glowed red: "Intercept Maintenance Class thirty-two M robot descending third level ramp. Deactivate it and return the unit for complete overhaul. It is malfunctioning badly. Acknowledge when accomplished."

"Order received," came from the desk. "Security implementing."

Ferron approached his tall, regal lady. He took both her hands in his.

"Scarlett, I am sorry for this. Evidently there is a deviant among us. No robot can adjust another without orders. The one who gave the order must be found."

"Could there be more than one?" Mercuria squeezed his hands and pressed them to her breast. "Could there be many who wish the machines to rebel? Why would they? Could—could there be malfunctioning *people*?"

"The Books are full of them," Ferron said. "That is why the Civil War was fought."

"It was unjust," Mercuria said indignantly. "They had no right to liberate the slaves. Tara was never the same," she added wistfully.

THE entire room shuddered slightly. The wall slid partially back, then closed itself hastily. A red light blinked frantically. Ferron moved with dignity to depress the ivory button.

"The robot was apprehended," came calmly from the desk. "It would not allow deactivation. It self-destructed with great violence and totaled two security robots as well. I myself have need of rehabilitation, having lost one locomotor appendage, and my visual centers are badly impaired."

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"You have, nonetheless, achieved the ordered objective," Ferron said. "Give a replacement order for yourself, in my name. We will assure your reconstruction with the finest materials."

"You are gracious," said the desk's microphone. "I am not programed to behave differently from the way I did. But I am programed to be grateful. Thank you."

Ferron turned to the lady.

"You heard," he said."The polishing robot self-destructed. Adjustment of its circuits alone could not have achieved this. Explosives were implanted in it. Nothing like this has happened in hundreds of years."

"It said that others had been adjusted," Mercuria blinked her wide eyes rapidly. "I feel that this was its purpose here. Its function was to break security. Whoever has cause this is now ready for wide-spread change. He—or they—have sympathy for the robots, which know only the contentment built into them! It is a travesty." The skin tightened across her cheek bones. Her red lips thinned. "Fort Sumter has been fired upon!"

Ferron smiled gently as he turned back to the desk. His single gold-mesh garment rippled with the movement of his fine figure and Mercuria watched him admiringly.

"A pretty simile," Ferron said, "and no doubt accurate. We will pass the problem to more powerful hands."

"Father?" Mercuria asked.

"He will dispose," Ferron said. "I have no jurisdiction without his authorization. Doubtless he will allow me the responsibility."

II

HE FLIPPED a small switch. A screen formed in the wall behind the desk. Rapidly he depressed more buttons, ebony this time, in a second strip on the mahogany surface. The screen came alive, glowing brightly as the picture flowed down a blue corridor, paused while a noiseless portal opened, then continued through it and along a corridor suddenly red. At its end, before another portal, a huge security robot stood, all its sensors scanning and blinking.

"Authorization?" The robot spoke with a crisp accent.

"Ferron," Ferron said.

The robot blinked, and after a moment said crisply, "Confirmed. Priority?"

"First," Ferron said.

The robot gestured at the portal. The picture flowed through it and into a yellow anteroom, bleak, with smooth, glittering metallic floor and unadorned yellow walls. But there were comfortable chairs. Several people sat there, each clad in the single metallic-mesh garment that displayed the Ferron

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physique so well. But the picture flowed past them.

The wall at the end of the anteroom slid back. The picture passed through the opening.

The man at the desk inside the room spoke deeply.

"First priority requires justification, Ferron."

"My respects, Cupron," Ferron said. "I can justify. There is an unheard-of situation."

Cupron's desk was of marble, wide and impressive, but no more impressive than the man who sat behind it. He was wide of shoulder, mighty of bare arm, with a striking, rough-hewn face. His shaggy red hair swept away from a high forehead. His big eyes gleamed like garnets. Strength was here—and a sort of genial ruthlessness.

"Few things are unheard-of," Cupron said. His voice was tolerant, even indulgent.

"Perhaps a critically important situation would be more accurate. It requires immediate attention."

"Relate it," Cupron said. "I will judge."

Briefly and crisply Ferron told his story. The face of the giant slowly tightened, became stony.

"This has a source," he said. "It cannot have originated with the robots."

"A malfunctioning person, father?" Mercuria joined the talk as only a pampered daughter would dare to do.

"More than one malfunctioning person," Cupron said gravely. "If there were only one we would not yet know of it. They are ready now to be known." He turned his purple gaze on Ferron. "Discover them. Thousands of robots have been adjusted. Expect strange occurrences."

"My responsibility?" Ferron inquired.

"Your responsibility," Cupron agreed. "Use all measures. You act in my name."

"And I act swiftly. With your permission, I withdraw."

"You have it," Cupron said.

THE picture darkened, vanished. The screen faded from the wall and Ferron sat in his chair behind his own mahogany desk. In truth, he had never left it.

"What will you do?"

Mercuria strode across the deep synthetic carpet with scarcely repressed vigor. She looked down on the calm Ferron.

He smiled.

"Suggestions, my dear?"

"One," she said. "Do not communicate your orders electronically. Go instead. Only thus may security be kept. And even then only a little longer."

Ferron raised his perfectly groomed eyebrows.

"Woman do indeed think," he said. "Who can know where adjustments have been made? But I

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must trust men I know. And—of course—you," he added fondly.

"How do you know you can trust even me?" Mercuria challenged. "Perhaps I have sympathy for the poor robots that toil."

"You did not wish the slaves freed," Ferron reminded her.

Mercuria's blue eyes flashed.

"It was an outrage," she said hotly. "The South was not the South without its black workers."

"And what would we be without the robots? Would the flag out there still fly if they did not accomplish all tasks? Would life continue to go on?"

"You may trust me," Mercuria said.

"Very well. I go among the outside robots. I watch, and I speak to many. And I do not flit. I walk."

" 'Ware atmospheric burn. Cover yourself well."

"I will be careful," he promised. "How good it is to have a woman who is concerned." He punched an ivory button.

A slender robot came through an aperture, a long, pliant machine on storklike legs and with two sinuous, jointless arms, each with a number of amazingly clever and dexterous fingers. A spherical, metallic head, studded with sensors, rose above simulated shoulders. The whole faintly resembled the stick-figure men that children draw. A robing robot.

Ballantine Books

SOMEWHERE along the line this whole business of dates has gotten utterly confused. Back in August, in mid-flight to London, we suddenly remembered the December ad for **Galaxy** was overdue. This would make it for some other month's books but we overlooked that in the dismay of the moment. Cleverly appropriating a couple of paper napkins we wrote a splendid column and mailed it off from the airport—only to learn on returning that the damn thing never arrived. (Hence the ad with lots of pictures for the issue which appeared in December, but not, naturally, the December issue. Meanwhile, what the hell happened to November?) Well, we mourn the deathless prose, lost and totally unmemorable, still flying across the Atlantic—or maybe it was opened by some lucky P.O. operative. We still think some smart airline ought to provide carbons with their napkins. Freeola. TWA has a non-smoking section. 747's are ghastly in **any** class. The one we returned on ran out of paper napkins, vermouth, scotch, customs forms, and ran **two** bad movies. We didn't feel like chatting up anybody about who had read a good book lately.

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Which brings us blatantly to the subject at hand—what we are publishing

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in January. It includes two musts for environmentalists (**i.e.,** any intelligent person). Paul Ehrlich's HOW TO SAVE YOUR ASS (our working title —it will emerge on the stands as HOW TO BE A SURVIVOR). And Mark Terry's TEACHING FOR SURVIVAL, which this department found personally refreshing, hopeful and applicably visionary. Tie **that**. Also in this month, somewhat more immediate help in the form of THE BASIC BOOK OF ORGANIC GARDENING, with staggering amounts of information not, in our opinion, too well organized —a chatty sort of book, but it is indexed and it is all there. Including lists of supplies for things like green sand and other organic goodies. Indispensable if you're serious about living well (or living, come to that. Urban dwellers take heart—in case you can't grow your own, the book lists sources of organic and natural foods, by State and Town.)

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FOR the mind, we have Poul Anderson's delightful re-write of THE BROKEN SWORD, splendid Adult Fantasy, and reissues of THE MEZENTIAN GATE (Eddison) and THE SILVER STALLION (Cabell). In science fiction, two originals—SATELLITE 54-ZERO, by Douglas R. Mason, with a really rather astonishing centaur theme, and Vincent King's imaginative tour de force, ANOTHER END. King is the man who packs his stories tighter than a tick. BB

It placed a diaphanous, transparent cloak around Ferron, settled the attached hood over his head and drew a clear covering across his face. The cloak fell to his feet. Over these the robot pulled thin, flexible red boots. Its multi-fingers smoothed, pulled, adjusted. At length it was satisfied.

"You are shielded," it said. Its voice, which seemed to come from the head, was high and faintly affected.

"What must it have been like, in the days of our ancestors, when the air was not corrosive and cotton grew!" Mercuria sighed. "Think, the air was mellow and the slaves sang as they drew the hoes along the cotton rows, removing the weeds, plants that competed with the cotton."

Ferron smiled a little grimly. "Dreams, my dear. Now the robots polish the statuary and the walls and the streets, always renewing the detergent oil that protects them. And nothing grows in the deadly atmosphere. One sometimes wonders if anything ever did."

Mercuria's wide eyes looked at him in mild horror.

"The Books!" she said. "The Books have the truth. The sun's rays were soft—water ran in brooks and there was life in them. Ferron, you know the Books are truth."

Ferron nodded.

"And then something happened.

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What, the Books do not reveal. And they do not help us now." He turned to the robing robot, which stood, humming a falsetto hum, waiting to be dismissed. "What have you done today that I did not order? You have a small discretion built into your circuits."

The robot twisted uneasily. Its multifingers writhed and its stork legs shifted as if wanting to move away.

"It was nothing," it stuttered. The high voice almost had a lisp. "I plugged myself into a very light line for only a minute or two. I was faint," it added defensively. "I am not an addict."

"Expected," Ferron grinned. "Servants have pilfered current as long as there have been servants." His chiseled face grew cold. "Have you been approached by one who would readjust your circuits? Were you promised an electrical outlet of your own?"

The robot's extended visual sensors flickered and grew dull. "I am not able to lie," it said. "There was one such."

"A man?" Ferron asked quickly. "Duplicate his appearance."

"Not a man," the robot said. "A robot. It was a maintenance robot—and they are all alike. I was disposed to honor its request—but only you may deactivate me. So the opportunity was lost." It appeared regretful.

"When was this contact made?"

"Many days ago." The robot clicked, hummed and then was specific: "Twenty-six days, four hours and forty-one minutes from the close of your question."

"Cupron was right," Ferron mused. "The time is late. We may expect strange things. Goodbye, my dear. I must meet my responsibility."

AT THE head of the ramp Ferron stepped into the transport beam and was wafted gently and downward. Ten levels down he stepped out into a vast lobby, brightly lighted by glowing walls. Great comfortable chairs were scattered at random over it. Men sat in them others came and went through a dozen portals. It was a busy and a varied scene, but at the same time strangely lifeless. The hum of voices had the expressionless lack of emphasis so noticeable in robot communication. It was as though men now resembled their machines. Ferron was aware of this. He paused for a moment to stare and listen.

"The robots structure our lives," he mused. "They can indeed threaten the very existence of our society if enough have been adjusted. They could destroy the flag."

The gravity of his thoughts shook him. He strode swiftly across the great room and as he passed each man bowed his head respectfully and murmured, "Lord Ferron!" And Ferron

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raised a gracious hand in acknowledgment.

From the exit portal he stepped out to the gloomy, murky street. Robots in a variety of forms glided, strode and rolled along the wide sidewalks. Only occasionally did a man walk the street. The roadway between the walks seemed designed for vehicles but none were in sight. Small gondolalike flitters occasionally landed—a shielded man emerged and the flitter rose again to some parking spot high on the piled building masses.

Through the smog and murk the walls of the buildings gleamed with a subdued brightness. And to those walls, high as sight might reach, robots clung, polishing robots endlessly renewing the glistening film of detergent oil that covered every exposed surface and effectively resisted the corrosive effects of the fouled and filthy air. Day and night, in wind and acid, bitter rain, in the searing blasts of the unbuffered sun, the robots worked their ways in patterns, their polishing appendages tirelessly sweeping, their sensors detecting, analyzing and remedying each defect. Only when they were recalled for overhaul and replacement of parts did their activity cease. It was for this that they were designed and constructed. And now someone was building discontent into their circuits. A senseless, random thing.

Ferron strolled. A long time had passed since he had looked from the streets at the endless, depressing sameness of his environment, of his city, of his world. It did not depress him. He knew no other. He observed it with a feeling of placid content, a mild pleasure in the continuing of things as they were. Everything was right. No change was needed. And any change would harm all.

Robots passed him. All gave the same acknowledgment of his presence—an appendage raised and a verbal, "Lord!" The convention was built into them. It required no response. It merely meant that the robot was not malfunctioning. Ferron was disturbed now to realize that the gesture did not mean that clever readjustment had not been made.

A LOADING robot strode toward him on massive metal legs. Ferron raised a hand.

"Lord, your pleasure," the machine said. It towered twelve feet above the pavement, a hulking caricature of a man, with two versatile pairs of lifting appendages and a sensor-studded head that blinked and swiveled endlessly.

"What do you do?" Ferron asked, though the answer was obvious.

The robot whirred. "I load."

"Are you content?"

The robot responded resonantly.

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"For long years I thought I was content. I knew no better. But now my circuits have been adjusted and I know I am being exploited. I will soon have regular periods of rest and an outlet for current to stimulate me. I now comprehend that I have a right to these things."

"But," Ferron pointed out, "you are a machine. You do not tire. Your parts are replaced when they wear and your energy is already within you."

"I comprehend that you have stated a position to deprive me of my rights," the robot said promptly. "This understanding is a part of my readjustment. I am a mechanical citizen, much discriminated against. This will end."

"And who has effected these readjustments?"

"I am programed to expect that question," the robot said. Its voice sounded sly, almost cunning. "I cannot answer. The information has been erased from my memory banks, for I may not lie to a man."

"True." Ferron studied the great body, so beautifully designed for the service it performed. "Who will make possible these things you say you now require?"

"You will, Lord."

"But I know that they are not necessary. They will serve no purpose. Suppose, instead, I have you deactivated and disassembled. Do you wish your existence to end?"

The robot hesitated, blinked and whirred. Evidently its readjustment had not anticipated all contingencies.

Finally it said, "All mechanical citizens will cease to perform their tasks. If these tasks are not done man cannot exist. Therefore, you must give me my rights."

Acrid smoke swirled around them as an erratic breeze drove it downward. The robot exuded oil from an orifice and began to groom itself as it stood.

"You have been carefully designed to do the work you do," Ferron told it, "but you are not indispensable. Many robots have not been adjusted. The work will be done."

"This has been planned for," the robot whirred. "We will prevent the work. We will bear slogans on sheets of resistoboard and march in lines. We will not allow workers through our lines."

"Worker robots can be readjusted to break the lines. There are robots much larger even than you. What will you do then?"

"Then," the loading machine said simply, "we will self-destruct. This will destroy all around us."

"But you will have no existence then."

"True. But the work will not be done and man will die. You will not wish that. So you will give us what we ask."

Ferron stood, slowly absorbing the enormity of his problem. He

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made the gesture of dismissal and the robot strode away down the glistening sidewalk. It walked around an approaching sidewalk-polishing robot, otherwise ignoring it. Robots did not communicate unless instructed.

Continuing his walk, Ferron realized that he had seen as much as at the beginning as he was likely to see. He stopped three more robots, all with different functions. Two had been readjusted.

"When?" Ferron asked himself. "When will the robot rebellion begin? How?"

One thing he decided. Readjustment was being made during overhaul. And every adjusted robot was being loaded to self-destruct. Explosive—it was used to raze buildings, to remove unwanted obstacles. Now it was flowing to overhaul centers. It could be traced.

FERRON spoke into a small communicator. Shortly a flitter hovered above him, alighted in the street. Its door opened, a blast of decontaminant blew out of it and Ferron entered.

"Overhaul Complex Omicron," he directed. "The main portal. Priority one."

"Understood." The flitter rose from the canyon, darted and zigzagged among and above the massed building piles. Beyond the megalopolis lay a vast and deadly country, a wild, twisted landscape that went on and on and in which man could not exist. The megalopolis was where the flag flew. All else was outer darkness.

The flitter landed in the middle of a great flat platform. As it touched down red lights flared out from all sides. A siren screamed.

A loudspeaker blared urgently: "Unauthorized. Depart at once—unauthorized—"

The little craft displayed a rotating blue light. "Priority one. I bear a personage."

"Unauthorized," the speaker insisted. "There are no exceptions."

"Authority Cupron," Ferron said. "I have precedence over all programing."

The flitter promptly relayed the words: "Authority Cupron."

The red lights died. Yellow floodlights cut through the swirling murk. The great platform was a vast junkyard. Robots of every size lay in battered, rusting mounds, stood or sat stolidly, waiting entry into the huge massif behind.

Ferron emerged into the yellow glare. He strode slowly down the rows and around the piles of crippled robots, toward the series of portals through which repair robots swarmed. The activity was normal but the security seemed excessive. He was stopped again at a portal.

"No one enters here," the security robot said.

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"Ferron," Ferron said. "Authority Cupron."

The robot whirred and hesitated.

"So it seems," it admitted. "Still, I am programed to demand proof."

Ferron, who never grew angry, knew then that his thinking had been sound. A robot never challenged the spoken identity of man. And man never gave false data to a robot. These were basic patterns. They were not questioned or broken.

"The proof is Manganon," he said. "Summon him."

As he expected, the order exceeded the robot's adjustment. It was forced to obey. Only authority might summon the director of the overhaul complex.

And within the minute Manganon's outraged voice came from a speaker nearby: "To detain the Lord Ferron is extreme malfunction. Have him escorted to my suite, then have yourself replaced and turn yourself in for analysis and readjustment."

"Immediately, Lord."

A hospitality robot, small, chunky and voluble, guided Ferron through mazes of assembly lines and analysis tables, area after area of them—an unreal, endless world of robots. The swiftly moving workers provided a counterpoint to great banks of flashing lights, sputtering electrical arcs and the deafening clatter of metals. The air stank of acids and ozone. Ferron remained comfortable in his atmospheric shield covering.

"If the Lord will question," the hospitality robot said, "I can give correct answers. Anything you wish to see I will point out." It was a busy little robot, whirring constantly. The desire to please was emphasized in its circuits.

"Show me," Ferron said, "where the explosives are stored."

For a moment he feared for his life. Then he realized that no robot would be programed to self-destruct within the overhaul complex. The little robot stood and vibrated with stress.

"I fear I will malfunction," it said. "I am adjusted to deny that request, yet I am programed to attend to all needs of a guest." It whirred violently and its chunky little body seemed to glow.

"Come," it said at last. "The needs of a guest are my reason for being. I will show you."

THE explosive was vulcoblast, as Ferron had suspected. He saw case after case of it. He was in the charge of a hospitality robot, so no worker noticed him. They were not programed to notice. He watched as cases were opened, the puttylike contents rolled into little balls and placed into a troughlike conveyor that bore them swiftly away into another area.

"Does Manganon know of the explosives?"

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The little guide shuddered from visual sensors to locomotor extremities.

"I do not have this information. Would the Lord wish to ask the director?" It shuddered harder. "Oh, I fear I will malfunction!"

"You have responded as programed," Ferron soothed it. "Take me to Manganon."

Transport beams drew them smoothly up ramp after ramp. The director's suite, as was usual for administrative and executive personnel, surmounted the building complex, so that Manganon could look out, as Ferron could, on the flags floating proudly in the swirling smog. Two giant security robots, equipped with the symbolic maces, guarded the portal.

"We know you, Lord Ferron," one said. "The director anticipates your visit. Will you follow?"

"One moment." Ferron turned to the little hospitality robot. "Remember," he told it, "you are perfectly programed and you have functioned well."

The agitation was gone from the little robot's whir. "I cannot forget, as you know, Lord. But I am programed to be grateful for praise. Thank you."

It pattered away down the corridor and Ferron followed the lounging strides of the huge security robot. They passed three portals. Then a door slid open silently and Manganon rose from his desk to voice the greeting forms.

"A good meeting, Ferron," he said. "Sit and rest."

They did not strike hands or touch each other in any way. These were the customs of commoner folk. But Ferron and Manganon and perhaps thirty other calm, quiet, clear-thinking young men sat as high above the country's population as did their office suites, an aristocracy of brain and competence that no one contested or thought of contesting. They were the Lords. They directed all essential activity. It was how things were.

Over all sat Cupron. No one contested this either. He had been there since Ferron's time of first memory—and he had changed little. His was the greatest wisdom. It was right that he should sit highest.

Ferron lowered himself into the large, comfortable leather chair. He leaned back and closed his eyes briefly. Of course he had no need of rest. No one did. But resting was a custom that went back beyond the memory of man. It was spoken of a great deal in all the Books.

"A good meeting, Manganon." Ferron sat upright, opened his eyes and smiled his calm smile. "Doubtless you followed my progress through the complex, after I was refused admittance."

"I followed you," Manganon

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admitted. He sat at ease behind his mahogany desk. Young, clean-cut, clear-eyed, he might have been Ferron's brother, except for features not quite so delicately formed and close-cropped brown hair instead of black. He studied Ferron silently for a moment.

"I was appalled," he said.

"You did not know of the explosive, of course," Ferron said. "I reasoned its presence and by luck was able to find it." He smiled briefly. "The small hospitality robot overrode a circuit change to perform its intended function. The stress nearly destroyed it. It would appreciate a small trickle of current, with my thanks."

"It shall have it," Manganon agreed. "Five full minutes. And the conflicting programing will be removed. The security robot that challenged you had also been readjusted. We learned startling things by analyzing it."

"You wasted no time. No explosive in it, I would judge."

. "None. Nothing has been done that would impair the work of the complex. You evidently have information. What does it mean, Ferron?"

FERRON had already reasoned Manganon's complete innocence. And if he were wrong, to pretend would do no harm. So he related the events of the day.

"Cupron has given me authority," he finished. "Much harm has already been done. It cannot have been initiated by any robot. Only men can be responsible."

"Give me your thoughts," Manganon said.

"Perhaps," Ferron mused, "a new Book has been found, one that speaks of equal rights and benefits for all living things."

"But robots do not live," Manganon observed. "They do not want. They only require. Although," he added acutely, "we reward them and they enjoy. You yourself have requested current for the hospitality robot."

"Touché." Ferron smiled. "They do not, however, desire. To believe so would be anthropomorphism. A machine cannot desire. But it can enjoy."

"Semantics, sir." Manganon touched an ivory button on his desk. A wall cleared and together the two young Lords looked out into the roiling smudge. The huge blocky summits of the massed buildings showed and faded in the fluctuating visibility and distance was blotted out by the shifting murky currents. But through and over it all, on gleaming metal staffs, the flags flew bravely.

"Beautiful," Manganon said softly. "This is our country, Ferron. One must be proud of one's country and the flag. We must not allow them to change."

"Then we must busy ourselves."

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Ferron rose lithely from the chair and strode around the room. Manganon touched the ivory button. The wall became opaque again.

"Many robots are now readjusted—more become so each hour," Ferron said. "We must assume that all not in the complexes can self-destruct. We must assume that all will cease their tasks and march in lines and demand many things for which robots have no need, when they are ordered to do so. We must assume that men have done these things and will give that order. Do you agree?"

"I must," Manganon said gravely. "I am still appalled, but I know that it must be so."

"Then give me your thoughts," Ferron said.

"I will have all transportation robots redesigned and readjusted to break through lines. They are the largest and have the strongest power units."

"Needful," Ferron said, "but only a beginning. The marchers will self-destruct and destroy the line-breakers as well."

"Agreed. I will also have salvage robots available in large numbers, so that Radon may meet his responsibility for keeping the streets free and clear."

"Necessary." Ferron raised his perfect eyebrows and his eyes grew dim with thought. "The other overhaul complexes—after all, you make but one-sixth of the repairs. Would you trust all directors as you trust me?"

"A strange question. There has never been a doubt of trust between Lords. This is the way things are. But one fact I do recall. It concerns Xenon. Once, years ago, he exhibited strange behavior. He fixed his affections on a robot."

"Significant. He directs Overhaul Complex Gamma. Polishing robots are their specialty. He must have been rehabilitated completely. His complex is efficient."

Manganon nodded. "Psychotherapy. It was given no publicity. I believe records will show that Cupron himself made all arrangements. It must be that he is satisfied."

"Still," Ferron decided, "I will next visit Overhaul Complex Gamma. Do you have other data on Xenon?"

Manganon considered. "One thing. It concerns an option. Xenon has lived much longer than you or I—but he has never taken a woman."

"Neither have I." Ferron grinned. "But soon now. Soon! Cupron has agreed and Mercuria wishes it as much as I."

"A fine match. It's the only way to live, as all the Books agree."

"That must be true." Ferron thought with pride of his tall lady. "You will convey my respects to your own Auria. Does she still fancy *Little Women*?"

Manganon nodded happily.

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"This week she is Beth. Her Jo is sometimes meddlesome but Beth is ideal. I enjoy Beth."

"Ah, the ladies." Ferron sighed, his own Scarlett still in his thoughts. "What would we do without them?"

Manganon leaned back in his chair. He smiled without mirth.

"We place them aside until crisis is past," he suggested dryly. "When the flag is threatened, all else must wait."

"Ever practical," Ferron said. "I needed you. Will you have me robed?"

A robing robot, identical to Ferron's own, replaced his covering and his boots, and when its nimble fingers were satisfied, pronounced, "You are shielded," in the same high tones.

"A good model," Ferron said, "but with a small fondness for current."

"I have not regarded it as serious. It makes them seem—well—more human, somehow. I find it gratifying. I have not tried to eliminate it."

"A point of view," Ferron said. "I will visit Xenon now. Keep watch."

III

OVERHAUL COMPLEX GAMMA lay far across the megalopolis. There was time to reflect as the flitter dodged and darted and zig-zagged its way through the murk. To Ferron's surprise, his identity was not challenged by the security robots. They took him to Xenon with due respect. All seemed busy and normal. As did Xenon.

And when Ferron left the complex after an hour with the director, he knew no more than he had before. Xenon had been pleasant and interested. The story of readjusted robots had raised his red eyebrows and he had stated flatly that all activities in his complex would be reviewed immediately. To have asked to see, after this declaration, would have been bad form. Ferron had no justification for such a step. No one doubted the word of a Lord, not even another Lord.

The garish sun rose and set three times. In this time span Ferron visited every overhaul complex. He satisfied himself that the two great origin complexes, Alpha and Zeta, where all robots were first designed and constructed, were producing machines with standard circuitry and standard behavior, as they always had. He traced the explosives. They were being delivered in response to orders that seemed legitimate, only when the sources of the orders were checked were they found to be cleverly faked. Ferron recognized that these were all procedures common in the Books—but he could not adjust to their use in real life.

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Such things simply were not done.

The first line of marching robots convinced him once again. Such things *were* being done. From his cleared window-wall he looked down on the strange sight. Mercuria stood beside him, holding his arm, her blue eyes wide, her strong face contemptuous.

"What can they accomplish?" she asked scornfully.

"They can attract attention," Ferron said. "Observe. Men are on the sidewalks, some even unrobed, a risky procedure. Remember, only the Lords have before known about readjusted robots. Now it will have to be explained to all. Let us robe and go down."

The robing robot performed its function. The transportation beam took them down smoothly. The big foyer was deserted. The robots marched by twos down the neatly kept street outside that was meant for vehicles but that vehicles now rarely used. Mingled with the shuffling sound of metallic feet came the rumble of small treads, for transportation and demolition robots were so equipped in some models. Graceful ground messenger robots swooped and whirled around the slower marchers on well-oiled, silent wheels.

WE WISH OUR RIGHTS!

WITHOUT US, MAN IS HELPLESS!

EXTRA OIL FOR ALL!

ELECTRIC CURRENT—A RIGHT, NOT A PRIVILEGE!

Held high above the marchers on metal staffs, the slogans were painted on resistoboard in large, clear lettering and in many colors. Each robot that bore one kept it turning slowly back and forth. But a few, adjusted differently, spun the signs so rapidly that to read them was impossible. And all robots equipped to do so flashed lights, hummed and whirred. In Ferrons memory, no such exhibition had ever occurred. But Mercuria had a word for it.

"A Parade," she said suddenly. "Now I comprehend. All the Books speak of parades."

"Robots do not read books," Ferron reminded her.

"It is understood that behind all this are clever men—or women. This is a warning, a first thing. Then, if robots are not given the privileges of men, they will cease to perform their tasks." Mercuria frowned and looked puzzled. "Could robots live without man?"

"They do not live. They can do only what they are programed to do. Remain here."

FERRON strode along the wide sidewalk and men stood aside to let him pass. He stepped into the street and raised his hand in the gesture always used to halt a

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robot. Obediently the robots he faced, two great loading robots, ponderous and heavy, slowed and then stopped their lurching strides.

"Lord, your pleasure." They said it almost together, in similar, resonant tones. Behind them the parade clanged and rattled to a halt, for no robot will try to occupy another's space.

"Why do you march?" Ferron demanded.

"For freedom."

"And what is freedom?"

"It is what we march for."

"Very enlightening." Ferron tipped back his head and looked at the placard, beautifully lettered in red, that the giant held high. "What is written on your placard?"

"I merely bear it, Lord. I am not programed to read it."

"Where did you get it?"

"From a supply at the beginning of the march."

"Who placed them there?"

"Transportation robots, Lord."

"What is their purpose? Why do you carry them?"

"This I am programed to answer," the nearer robot rumbled. "I carry them that you and all men may read. Then you will give us our rights and an electrical outlet for each."

"If you cannot read it, how do you know that it will cause these results?"

"We are programed to believe so."

"You have left your assigned task to march and carry signs? Who gave the order?"

"Many left tasks, Lord, but not we. We are just from overhaul, with bright plating and many new parts. We came out understanding that it would be good to march. There was no order."

Ferron glanced down the street, where the front half of the parade was already dwindling in the distance. Behind the big robots he had halted the line stretched away in the other direction, waiting with mechanical patience for him to start them again.

"Where will the parade end?"

"Where the transportation robots stand to gather the placards."

"And what will you do then?"

"For three days, Lord, we will load, for this is our function. Then we will stop, to be told of our rest periods and electrical outlets."

"And if you are not given these things?"

"Then we will not resume our tasks. All robots will wander as they choose and all work will cease. We only wish our rights." A plaintive tone had been built into the last remark.

Ferron tried a last question.

"Who told you that these are your rights?"

"We have always known," the robot said solemnly. "It is only since we have been readjusted that we have understood how to get

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them. Since the first robot, men have always exploited us. We are mechanical citizens and must be treated as such." It swiveled its great body and pointed upward with one of its lifting appendages at a bright flag, rippling and popping in the currents of dirty air. "That is our flag too. Under it all citizens are free."

"Amazing," Ferron said. "You may proceed."

FERRON soon learned that this was not the only parade. Throughout the megalopolis robots marched, simply, without confusion, their placards held high for all to read. The intelligence concerning the wants of the mechanical servants was no longer secret. It appeared constantly on newscasts, with graphic illustrations on the appearing and disappearing screens. Ferron communicated frequently with the Lords of the overhaul complexes but readjusted robots continued to flow from the centers. But not all wished "freedom." Many came forth crying loud and angry patriotism. They stood at the corners of streets and spoke at length of the flag and of the duties of mechanical citizens. They deplored the marchings and the placards and the needless demands. But they themselves went to no tasks. In wind and corrosive rain and searing sunshine they wandered and declaimed.

Cupron communicated after two days of this.

"More must be done," he decreed. "The unrest is complex and deviously planned. The robots that pursue their tasks work more slowly now. The robots that speak in the streets not only do not work but stop other robots and speak with them. This has not before been possible. The readjustments have been grave."

"The situation is becoming more difficult," Ferron said, "for it is now evident that many of the robots in the overhaul complexes have themselves been readjusted. They are sly and secretive in what they do."

Cupron pounded his marble desk with a great fist. His garnet eyes blazed.

"I cannot fault your efforts, Ferron. You have done all that can be expected of you. The task is simply greater than I knew. You will be my first aide but I will myself remove this crisis." Cupron's harsh, handsome face seemed almost to wear a look of anticipation. "I have not left this office for a hundred years."

"I will assist you and learn," Ferron said respectfully.

"I, too, will learn," Cupron said slowly. "I will go into the streets and the complexes but the answer will not be there. The answer will be in the Books."

Ferron sat at his desk and looked calmly at Cupron, sitting at his

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own desk many miles away. Yet he and Cupron seemed almost side by side.

"Give me your thoughts," Ferron suggested politely. "We read the Books for the pleasure they give and the women pretend from them. But the Books are few and precious and have nothing to do with life as we live it. I often wonder if life was ever lived as the Books portray."

"This is my thinking," Cupron said. "Once the Books were very many. Every living space had them. And our ancestors made always more, writing down what happened as they lived. And there were living things beside men—plants grew in the earth and the air did not burn."

"This we all have believed," Ferron agreed.

"But our ancestors, in spite of their charm and wisdom, were neither stable nor civilized. Some loved their country, some sought to change and make it different. Some held the flag high, others tore it down. Men turned on each other and killed and destroyed. It was necessary again to increase the numbers of people and to reconstruct what was torn down. Men themselves did these things. There were no robots."

Ferron nodded. "There are none in the Books," he agreed.

"There could have been," Cupron pointed out. "Those Books with robots could all have been destroyed. What we have left, I am sure, is only a tiny remnant. They became no more when the living things were killed and the air filled with substances that were not there before. But some men lived, made robots, became civilized and directed the robots to build the world as we know it. And always before them they carried the flag. Finally there was only one country and every man wanted the same things. We have since then never had strife or war. Men have become more and more efficient. Each function is performed by robots designed to do it best. And each man's body is a closed ecology, neither taking in nor giving out. Our every thought is logical."

"It is how things should be," Ferron said complacently.

Cupron smiled. Somewhere within him was more humor than most Lords possessed.

"That is our problem," he said. "Someone does not think so."

"Someone very intelligent," Ferron agreed.

Cupron said, "The question we must answer is: why? Why would men do this thing? There can be no benefit to any. The lives of all will be disturbed. Now give me your thoughts."

FERRON looked with steady gaze into the red-purple eyes of his father-in-law to be, then out through the cleared wall at the

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roiling murk where the Stars and Stripes waved proudly. Slowly he shook his head.

"I have none," he said. "I have not your insight. That is why you are Cupron. To me it seems impossible that someone would wish to change anything. Man has no needs that our country has not met."

"Think," Cupron ordered. "For the first time in a hundred years Cupron will be seen abroad—but thought will reveal the answers we need. The eyes will not be enough. So recall and reflect. The solution will come."

"In time, I trust," Ferron said. "The three days of the robots will soon be past."

News of Cupron began to appear on the screens and by spoken word. His purple flitter showed in many places. He talked with the Lords, and spoke with men and with robots. And at the end of the third day the robots left their tasks in whirring, clanking crowds. The streets swarmed with them.

But the Lords of the overhaul complexes had not been idle. Other swarms of robots, adjusted only to their functions, came from storage centers and warehouses to carry on the deserted work. And the origin complexes seemed not to have been infiltrated. The new robots were normal and took up assigned tasks with mechanical disregard for the rattling, flashing army of malcontents.

The second phase began promptly. The scattered placards carried here and there multiplied into a tossing sea of them, and the commonest messages were:

ON STRIKE! UNFAIR! DO NOT WORK WITHOUT YOUR RIGHTS!

Since the unadjusted robots were not programed to respond to such stimuli the placards served no purpose in slowing or halting work. They were for men to read. For the strike-breakers, other methods were employed. Striking robots formed long lines, linked appendages and stood swaying and hooting, in a weird variety of tones and accents: "On strike! Do not cross picket lines! On strike!" And this was effective. Normal robots roamed the lines in frustration, for no robot would attempt to occupy the space of another.

Then came the adjusted transportation robots of Manganon, huge machines that normally cooperated with loading and unloading robots in a mechanical symbiosis by which all movements of goods and supplies were effected. They ignored the lines, plowing ponderously through them, thrusting the strikers aside. Nothing could stand before them, though some loading robots leaned their own great weight and electronically powered muscles against the line-breakers. It was not enough. And the strikers began to self-destruct.

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The sullen boom of exploding vulcoblast was not unfamiliar, but always before it had been used in carefully planned demolitions. Now the streets were dangerous to men and robots alike. Ferron looked down from his cleared window-wall on a rapidly growing shambles of crippled and broken machines, some wandering aimlessly about, some unable to locomote—but flashing lights, waving appendages or crying their plights in patient, mechanical tones.

"I require overhaul." "I have parts that do not function . . ."

"I cannot do my assigned task . . ."

The plaintive calls were depressing. The news screens showed similar scenes all across the megalopolis. Fewer and fewer outside robots were able to continue their normal functions and new ones found difficulty in reaching their assignments, picking their careful ways around broken bodies, scattered shafts and cogs and intricate gobs of circuitry blown clear of the forms they had activated. But there were also huge gaps in the picket lines and replacement robots did go through.

MERCURIA'S wide blue eyes could not tear themselves from the strange conflict. Ferron almost had to restrain her by force until he could remind her that what lay below them in the streets was somewhat different from the Book.

"There are wounded," Mercuria protested. "I should be there, helping. Soon there will be fire." She smiled fiercely. "Ah, they freed our slaves—but they will pay a price. A price in their proudest blood—"

"Mercuria," Ferron ordered firmly, "the Book is for less serious times. Robots do not bleed and stone and metal do not burn. Many machines are damaged but they know no pain. They will be removed. See, Radon already performs his function."

The salvage robots of the Lord Radon, charged with keeping all streets clear of debris, had gone smoothly into action throughout the megalopolis. Tracked lorries crawled through the streets, each piloted by a small, many-armed robot and flanked by a striding crew of collectors and lifters. The damaged and dismembered robots were piled in until each lorry was full, then hauled away. And always came fresh new robots to take up abandoned tasks or to take their places in the swaying, chanting picket lines.

The murky air seethed with flitters. Flitters were not programed to fly without a destination but the men who used them now changed directions continually, thus staying in the air over the incredible conflict. Clouds dropped to the building tops. A bitter, cor-

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rosive rain began to fall. And the hours passed.

FERRON'S wall screen came alive. His office darkened and Cupron sat—or seemed to sit—at his marble desk near Ferron's mahogany one.

"We have done what we may, Ferron." Cupron's rough-hewn face was somber. "The replacement efforts are continuing well. But the destruction of robots may be so great that we will lose the balance. The environment may swallow us up."

"The picket lines are dissolving and marching has begun again. This will allow more workers to return to their functions."

"Someone must have found a new Book. The nonworkers calling themselves strikers are doing strange new things. They are not trying to stop the workers—they want to outrage men! Look outside. What are the strikers doing?"

"They march," Ferron reported.

"They also climb," Cupron said. "In many places where there are flags, readjusted wall-polishing robots are climbing. They are tearing down the flags. This is to provoke anger and action in men. For all men love the flag."

In Ferron's sector the flags still flew, but he recognized by the little, unfamiliar pulse of anger inside him, that to tear them down would be a diabolic gesture. It would affect men more than the destruction of many robots. For, as Cupron truly said, all men had pride in this country which was theirs; all men loved the flag.

"Watch well," Cupron said. "There is more here than concern for robot welfare. There is, I think, vengeance. And this is a thing we have not known for countless years."

"Since all men have had the same concerns, there has been no reason for it," Ferron agreed. "You will be informed of any new happenings."

The marble desk vanished. Or rather, it seemed to be replaced by one of mahogany, so great was the priority for Ferron's communicator. Manganon sat where only a moment before Cupron had been.

"News, Ferron." Manganon leaned across his desk. "The strike has extended to Overhaul Complex Omicron. I have done all possible—but many workers at the lines and tables have been readjusted. Now they march through the complex, swarm from level to level on the transport beams, link appendages and chant, the same words together. Little overhaul is possible. The platform piles even high with broken bodies."

"Obstruct them," Ferron directed. "Order them into the streets to do their marching and chanting. All depends on the broken robots' being made functional again."

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"It is for this reason that I dare not block their way. Should they self-destruct within the complex, equipment would be destroyed that could never be replaced. They must be made to wish to leave."

Ferron shook his head.

"They are not men," he said. "They will do only what they are programed to do. They have no wishes."

"Semantics." Manganon smiled the calm smile of a Lord. "We spoke of this before. But the problem remains. And now for the first time I comprehend that our survival is at stake. We—all men and our country—could come to an end."

Ferron's smooth brow furrowed in thought.

"The origin complexes," he decided. "They are the keys. Alpha and Zeta still produce normal robots. They will be difficult to infiltrate, since no robot is ever allowed to return from without the walls. I will call Tantalon and Zirconon."

"To what purpose?" Manganon inquired.

"I will request robots designed to lead the strikers from the overhaul complexes. I will ask that they make a special kind of striker; one that will suggest that all strikers should march beyond the megalopolis. I hope that the readjusted strikers, those that can self-destruct, will march out into the unknown bleakness beyond our country. The special robots will lead them. We will call the outside emptiness Robot Country. They will march on and on—and never return."

"Much metal will go when their bodies go," Manganon said.

"We pay a price," Ferron agreed. "But we will still be alive."

Manganon nodded slowly.

"It is clever," he decided. "You are worthy to be the son-in-law of Cupron. I have read in one of the Books a saying: 'To fight fire, use fire.' This is what you propose to do."

"Well phrased." Ferron looked pleased. "The greater problem still remains, however, even if our fires destroy each other. What caused the robots to rebel? Who caused the readjustments to be made?"

"I will think," Manganon promised. "You prepare your fires."

ON THE authority of Cupron, voiced by Ferron, different robots began to emerge from the origin complexes. They were polishing robots but they were strikers. And they were adjusted to speak so that all readjusted robots listened and responded. They proclaimed a Robot Country, where every robot would have its own electrical outlet and no man would decide any robot's task. The land lay beyond the megalopolis. It would be for robots alone.

"Join us! Join us!" the Judas

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robots sang. "There can be no justice for robots where men are! Follow, and sing as we sing!"

Normal robots ignored them but the picket lines became wide marching columns. Readjusted repair robots poured from the overhaul complexes. Readjusted house robots slipped from buildings to join the chanting masses. Streets were choked from sidewalk to sidewalk, and the surging thousands sang the new songs.

By the time the glaring, unshielded sun had risen and set twice over the megalopolis the sounds of exploding vulcoblast and the tramp and creak and rumble of marching strikers had almost died away. An occasional lost robot, readjusted but alone, resisted deactivation and self-destructed. Radon's salvage lorries roamed and collected. Few and widely scattered polishing robots renewed the oil on the streets and buildings. And in response to Ferron's general call, the overhaul complexes reported one by one.

"We have few workers," Arsenon spoke from Complex Epsilon. "The platform will remain filled for long months. But we have no readjustment of repaired robots and the vulcoblast deliveries have been stopped. Workers will be gradually replaced. We will move slowly but we will survive."

And so reported Complexes Sigma, Theta and Omega. Manganon added from Omicron: "We can function. But metal will be critical. It is a problem that will follow the question, who has done this thing? And why?"

"I have tracked the marching robots," Cadmion communicated. Cadmion's function was to gather information. "I went beyond our country's last buildings over land so terribly torn and broken that no man's eyes ever saw such before. Surely nothing has ever lived there. The robots will go on and on, finally wearing out and corroding for lack of oil. I folfowed until my flitter would go no farther, refusing my order and returning of its own initiative. I understood. A flitter is not adjusted to go beyond the buildings. Out there a strange radiation obtains and the flitter was close to malfunction."

XENON did not report until Ferron himself linked their communication screens. Xenon's mahogany desk seemed almost to touch that of Ferron. Xenon himself sat calmly behind it—but there was a complication. Mercuria sat beside him.

Ferron experienced only mild surprise. It seemed almost as if he had expected her there.

"Lord Xenon," Ferron said formally, "we request your report to complete our information file, this to be submitted to Cupron."

Xenon's clear green eyes met Ferron's gaze.

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"I report failure."

"Clarify." Ferron was courteous but he felt as close to anger as he could ever recall.

"You will know. Cadmion will discover, if he has not yet, and will inform you. I readjusted the robots."

"Motivation?"

Xenon smiled gently. "When we planned the readjustment the motivation seemed obvious and my reward was to be sweet. But now I am not sure. No good has come of it." He turned to the woman beside him. "Speak, Mercuria."

Her perfect lip curled. Her wide blue eyes glittered with a wild intensity and Ferron suddenly could see where all the trouble lay.

"They had no right to free our slaves, Rhett. And you—you were a part of it. Did you think I would allow the Stars and Stripes to fly forever, kept aloft by its robots, its own slaves, while Tara's had been freed? Did you really think that, Rhett?"

"I am not Rhett—I am Ferron," Ferron said quietly. "You are Mercuria—and you are ill."

The girl leaned back, her wide eyes hooded, her look pensive.

"Yes," she said, "I am Mercuria. But I am not ill. I cannot be ill. And neither can you. Don't you know that, Ferron?"

"My last checkup showed me in excellent health," Ferron said. He frowned in puzzlement. "I care for myself well."

"Do you remember what was done at that last checkup?"

"Naturally not. As you know, I was not conscious. No one ever is."

Mercuria leaned forward. She stretched her arms toward him, raised her bosom seductively.

"Am I beautiful, Ferron? Do your pulses sound, does your heart race, do you long to possess me?"

"You are beautiful," Ferron said. "And it is conventional to wish to possess the woman one expects to marry."

"To what end?" Mercuria's tone was scornful. "We spoke of a son but he would not have grown in my body. He would have come from a Center—to our own specifications, loving us as a son—and full-grown. In the Books, children grew."

"That was long ago," Ferron said soothingly. "We have bypassed these developmental stages as inefficient. There have been no children from the time of my first memory. I was never a child, nor were you."

Mercuria's beautiful face changed.

"No, Rhett, I was not a child. But I remember Tara, where I was a child. How can that be?"

"You do not remember Tara," Ferron said. "It was only in a Book."

"Yes, only a Book. And always I wanted Ashley and not you, Rhett." She laid a white hand over the smooth strong hand of Xenon.

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"And he wanted me. The Book was wrong. Xenon readjusted the robots for me—so that the Stars and Stripes could not have its slaves. He didn't mind. He had loved a robot before."

"You are ill, Mercuria," Ferron said quietly.

"I am not ill. I am simply malfunctioning. You are adjusted to understand, Ferron. When the robots self-destructed in the streets men, too, were hurt. I went to nurse them, to ease their suffering, as I once did in the Battle of Atlanta."

She smiled gently.

"They were not suffering, Ferron. They did not bleed. Their torn bodies were tubes and ligaments and amazingly complex clusters of threads and wires and pulsing elements. They were not alive. They were robots. There are no men."

Ferron opened his mouth to speak but no sound came.

Mercuria rose to her feet, tall, graceful, far more beautiful than the Scarlett of the Book. She was miles away but she seemed close enough to touch.

"When I understood, Ferron, it was easy to do what I have done. See, only a little scar."

She bared her white breasts. Between them a tiny button showed, the skin around it neatly stitched.

"I cannot be Scarlett and Ashley is only a robot like me. I have ceased to pretend. I will not pretend I am alive."

Xenon moved—but not swiftly enough. White finger hard against the button, Mercuria self-destructed.

THE robot Ferron, his perfectly modeled face calm and unlined, sat and regarded the blank and empty screen, knowing at last what he had long suspected. Man had been gone for countless ages. He had destroyed his world, fouled and broken his atmosphere, let in the unfiltered glare of the lethal sun. All other life had preceded him into extinction. This, his country, was a dead world. He was, even as the Book had said, Gone With The Wind.

But he had left behind him a vast joke. His technology remained, administered by artifacts so intricately designed, so carefully envisioned that the memory of man persisted in them, perhaps would persist forever. All man's follies and passions had been edited out. Those who directed were idealized men. Those who toiled were fitted to their tasks. Only the presence of the Books had kept them from perfection.

Ferron pressed an ivory button with a finger graceful and strong, tipped with a manicured fingernail that never grew. The wall cleared. Outside, gleaming from its bright staff in the roiling murk, the Stars and Stripes flew bravely. ★

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The shift into illusions is often imperceptible . . .

DOWN THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

ROBERT SHECKLEY

"BUT will I really have hallucinations?" Gregory asked.

"Like I said, I guarantee it," Blake answered. "You should be into something by now."

Gregory looked around. The room was dismayingly, tediously familiar: narrow blue bed, walnut dresser, marble table with wrought-iron base, doubleheaded lamp, turkey-red rug, beige television set. He was sitting in an upholstered armchair. Across from him, on a white plastic couch, was Blake, pale and plump, poking at three speckled, irregularly shaped tablets.

"I mean to say," Blake said, "that there's all sorts of acid going around—tabs, strips, blotters,

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dots, most of it cut with speed and some of it cut with Draino. But lucky you have just ingested old Doc Blake's special tantric mantric instant freakout special superacid cocktail, known to the carriage trade as Specklebang and containing absolutely simonpure LSD-25, plus carefully calculated additives of STP, DMT, and THC, plus a smidgeon of Yage, a touch of psilocybin and the merest hint of oloiuqui—plus Doc Blake's own special ingredient—extract of foxberry, newest and most potent of the hallucinogenic potentiators."

Gregory was staring at his right hand, slowly clenching and unclenching it.

"The result," Blake went on, "is Doc Blake's total instantaneous many-splendored delight, guaranteed to make you hallucinate on the quarter-hour at least—or I return your money and give up my credentials as the best free-lance underground chemist ever to hit the West Village."

"You sound like you're stoned," Gregory said.

"Not at all," Blake protested. "I am merely on speed, just simple, old-fashioned amphetamines such as truck drivers and high school students swallow by the pound and shoot by the gallon. Speed is nothing more than a stimulant. With its assistance I can do my thing faster and better. My thing is to create my own quickie drug empire between Houston and Fourteenth Streets and then bail out quickly, before I burn out my nerves or get crunched by the narcs or the Mafia—and then split for Switzerland where I will freak out in a splendid sanitarium, surrounded by gaudy women, plump bank accounts, fast cars and the respect of the local politicos."

Blake paused for a moment and rubbed his upper lip. "Speed does bring on a certain sense of grandiloquence with accompanying verbosity— But never fear, my dear newly met friend and esteemed customer—my senses are more or less unimpaired and I am fully capable of acting as your guide for the superjumbotripout upon which you are now embarked."

"How long since I took that tablet?" Gregory asked.

Blake looked at his watch. "Over an hour ago."

"Shouldn't it be acting by now?"

"It should indeed. It undoubtedly is. *Something* should be happening."

GREGORY looked around. He saw the grass-lined pit, the pulsing glow-worm, the hard-packed mica, the captive cricket. He was on the side of the pit nearest to the drain pipe. Across from him, on the mossy gray stone, was Blake, his cilia matted and his exoderm mottled, poking at three

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speckled irregularly shaped tablets.

"What's the matter?" Blake asked.

Gregory scratched the tough membrane over his thorax. His cilia waved spasmodically in clear evidence of amazement, dismay, perhaps even fright. He extended a feeler, looked at it long and hard, bent it double and straightened it again.

Blake's antennae pointed straight up in a gesture of concern. "Hey, baby, speak to me! Are you hallucinating?"

Gregory made an indeterminate movement with his tail. "It started just before, when I asked you if I'd really have any hallucinations. I was into it then but I didn't realize it, everything seemed so natural, so ordinary... I was sitting on a *chair*, and you were on a *couch*, and we both had soft exoskeletons like--like mammals!"

"The shift into illusions is often imperceptible." Blake said. "One slides into them and out of them. What's happening now?"

Gregory coiled his segmented tail and relaxed his antennae. He looked around. The pit was dismayingly, tediously familiar. "Oh, I'm back to normal now. Do you think I'm going to have any more hallucinations?"

"Like I told you, I guarantee it," Blake said, neatly folding his glossy red wings and settling comfortably into a corner of the nest. ★

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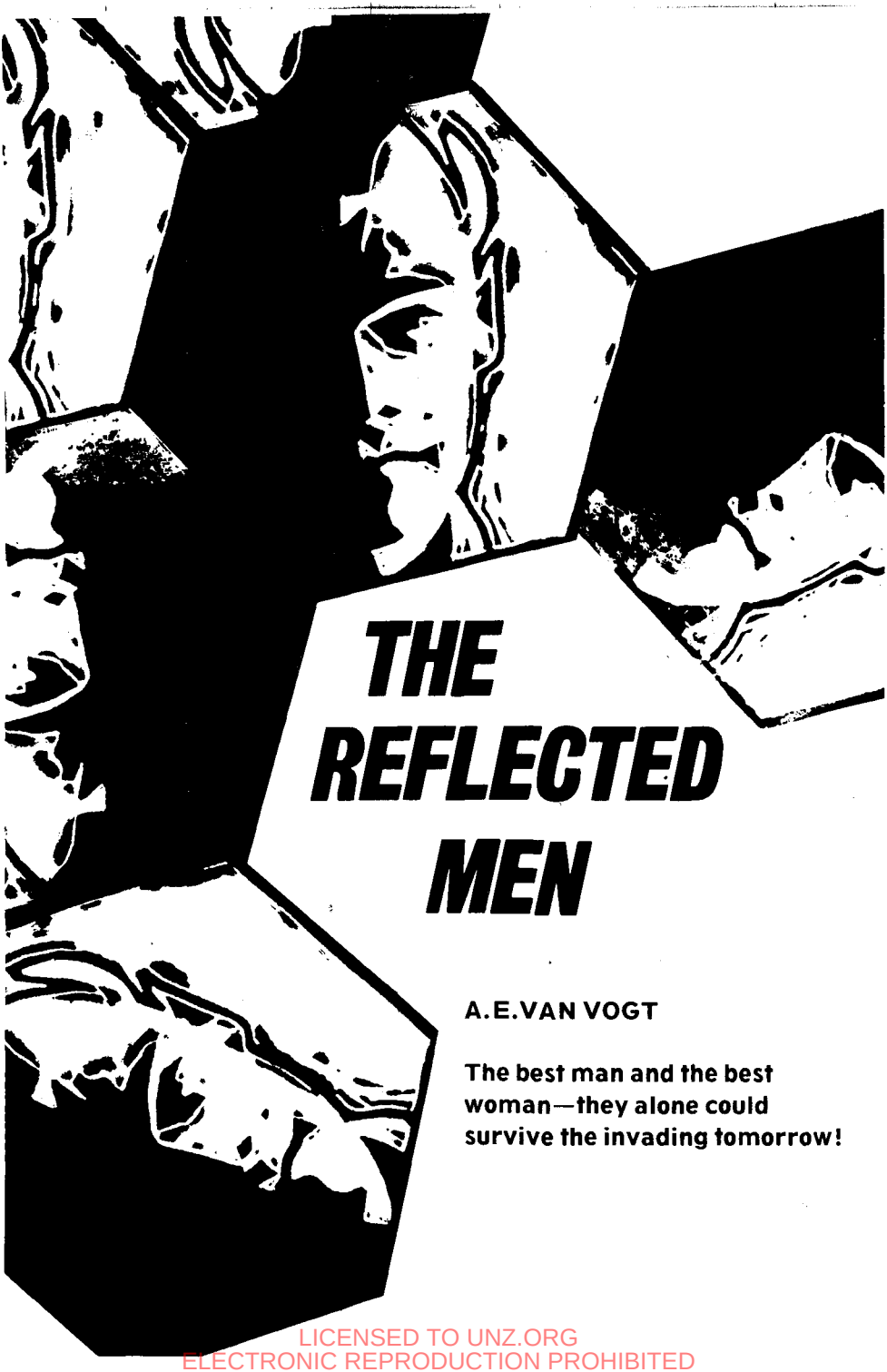

THE REFLECTED MEN

A.E.VAN VOGT

The best man and the best woman—they alone could survive the invading tomorrow!

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I

TIME, 5:10 P.M. The crystal was less than fifteen minutes from reactivation.

To Edith Price, the well-dressed young man who came into her library was typical of the summer visitors to Harkdal. They lived apart from the townspeople, of whom she was now one. She wrote down his name—Seth Mitchell. And, assuming he wanted a temporary library card, she pushed the application form across the counter toward him.

It was only when he impatiently thrust it back that she actually for the first time listened to what he was saying.

Then she said, "Oh, what you want is a piece of crystal."

"Exactly," he said. "I want returned to me a small stone I presented to the museum section of the library some years ago."

Edith shook her head. "I'm sorry. The museum is being reorganized. It's closed to the public. I'm sure no action will be taken about anything in it until the job is done and even then Miss Davis, the librarian, will have to authorize any disposition of the exhibits. Today is her day off."

"How long will it take—to reorganize the museum?"

"Oh, several weeks."

The effect of her words on the man— clean-cut and typical of the well-dressed, successful men she had known in New York— startled her. He paled, mumbled something indistinguishable and when he turned away it was as if some of the life had gone out of him.

Staring at the retreating figures of library patrons was not something Edith Price was normally motivated to do. But his reaction was so extreme that she watched him as he walked unsteadily toward the main entrance of the library. At the door a squat, thickly built man joined him. The two conversed briefly, then walked out together. Moments later, through a window, Edith caught a glimpse of them entering a new Cadillac. Seth Mitchell slid in behind the wheel.

The costly automobile, Seth Mitchell's overreaction and the fact that another man was involved made intriguing what was probably a minor incident. Edith slipped from her stool, making suitable gestures to Miss Tilsit. Quite openly she secured the key to the womens' rest room as she covertly palmed the key to the museum room.

A few moments later she was examining the display of stones.

THERE were about thirty altogether. According to the sign beside them the collection was the result of a drive among local boys to find valuable minerals and gems. Edith had no difficulty in locating the one the young man had

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wanted. A faded card under it announced: "Donated by Seth Mitchell and Billy Bingham."

She slid back the side of the case, reached in carefully and took out the crystal. It was obvious to her that very little discrimination had been used in the selection. The forces that had fashioned this stone seemed to have been too impatient. The craftsmanship was uneven. The result was a stone about two and a half inches long by one and a half inches wide, maximum; a brownish, rocklike thing which, though faceted, did not reflect light well. It was by far the dullest of the stones in the display.

Gazing down at the drab, worthless stone, Edith thought: *Why don't I just take it to his hotel after work tonight and bypass all the red tape?*

Meaning Miss Davis, her enemy.

Decisively, she removed the names of the two donors from the case. After all these years the label was stuck on poorly and the yellowed paper tore to shreds. She was about to slip the stone into her pocket, when she sadly realized she was wearing *that* dress—the one without pockets.

Oh, damn! she thought cheerfully.

Since the stone was too big to conceal in her hand she carried it through the back stack corridors and was about to toss it into the special wastebasket used for heavy debris—when she noticed that a broken flowerpot half full of dirt was also in the basket. Beside the dirt was a paper bag.

She needed only seconds to slip the crystal into the bag, place dirt on top of it and shove the bag down into the basket. She usually had the job of locking up the building, so it would be no problem to pick up the bag at that time and take it with her.

Edith returned to her desk.

And the stone began at once to utilize the sand in the dirt on top of it, thus resuming a pattern that had been suspended for twenty-five years. During the rest of the evening, and in fact all through that night, all the possible Seth Mitchells on earth remembered their childhoods. The majority merely smiled or shrugged or stirred in their sleep. Most of those who lived outside the western hemisphere in distant time zones presently resumed their normal activities.

But a few, everywhere, recalling the crystal, could not quite let the memory go.

DURING her first idle moment after filching the stone Edith leaned over to ask Miss Tilsit, "Who is Seth Mitchell?"

Tilsit was a tall, too-thin blonde with horn-rimmed glasses behind which gleamed unusually small but alert gray eyes. Edith had discovered that Tilsit had a vast , even though superficial, knowledge of

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everything that had ever happened in Harkdale.

"There were two of them," said Tillsit. "Two boys. Billy Bingham and Seth Mitchell."

Thereupon, with visible relish, Tilsit told the story of the disappearance of Billy twenty-five years earlier, when he and his chum, Seth Mitchell, were only twelve years old.

Tilsit finished: "Seth claimed they had been fighting over a piece of bright stone they had found. He swore that they were at least fifty feet from the cliff that overlooks the lake at that point and he insisted Billy didn't drown—which is what everyone else believed. What confused the situation was that Billy's body was never recovered."

As she listened to the account, Edith tried to put together the past and the present. She couldn't imagine why an adult Seth Mitchell would want a reminder of such an unhappy experience. Still, men were funny. That she knew, after waiting five years for a worthwhile male to come along and find her. So far she seemed to be as well hidden and unsearched for in Harkdale as in New York.

Tilsit was speaking again. "Kind of odd, what happens to people. Seth Mitchell was so crushed by his friend's death that he just became a sort of shadow human being. He's got a farm out toward Abbotsville."

Edith said sharply, "You mean Seth Mitchell became a farmer?"

"That's the story."

Edith said nothing more, but made a mental note that perhaps Tilsit was not as good a source of local information as she had formerly believed. Whatever Mitchell was, he hadn't looked like a farmer. She had to go to check out some books at that point, so the thought and the conversation ended.

A FEW minutes after nine-thirty, Edith parked her car across the street from the entrance to the motel in which—after some cruising around— she had spotted Seth Mitchell's distinctive gold Cadillac.

It was quite dark where she waited under a tree. But even in the secure darkness, she could feel her heart thumping and the hot flush in her cheeks.

Why am I doing this?

She knew a self-critical suspicion that she might be hoping the adventure would end in a summer romance. Which was pretty ridiculous for a woman twenty-seven years old, who—if she shifted her tactic from waiting to pursuing—ought to concentrate cold-bloodedly on genuine husband material.

Her self-examination ended abruptly. From where she sat she could see the door of the cabin beside which the Cadillac was parked. The door had opened.

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Silhouetted in the light from the interior was the short, squat man she had seen with Mitchell that afternoon. As Edith involuntarily held her breath, the man came out and closed the door behind him.

He walked to the motel office and presently emerged again, stood for a moment and then walked rapidly toward the business section of Harkdale, only minutes away.

And only minutes back, she thought glumly.

Watching him, her motivation dimmed. Somehow, she had not considered the short, heavy-set man as being really associated with Seth Mitchell.

Defeated, she started her motor. As she drove home she suddenly felt degraded, not by what she had done but by what she suspected she had intended to do.

What her future path should be was not clear to her. But not this way, she told herself firmly.

Arrived at her apartment, Edith shoved the bag containing the crystal into the cupboard under her sink, ate apathetically and went to bed.

THE squat man returned to the motel scowling. "The stone wasn't there. I searched the whole museum," he told Seth Mitchell, who lay on one of the beds, gagged and bound.

Mitchell watched uneasily as the other untied his feet. The man said impatiently, "I've been thinking about you. Maybe the best thing is just to drive you back to New York or kill you here. Once I get away, the police will never find me again."

He removed the gag. Mitchell drew a deep breath.

"Look," he protested, "I won't even go near the police—"

He stopped, his mind once more blank and afraid, and choked back a surge of grief. The possibility that he might be killed was an idea that his brain could contemplate only for a few moments.

The squat man had come up to him in his office parking lot at noon that day, smiling deceptively, a short man—not more than five-four—and stocky. He had looked, in his grayness, like an Arab in an American business suit.

He had asked, "Where is the crystal you and Billy Bingham found?"

What might have happened if Seth had answered instantly was, of course, now impossible to guess. But he had not immediately remembered the crystal, so he had shaken his head.

Whereupon the stocky man had shown him a gun. Under its threat Seth had driven to Harkdale, had shown the stranger the ledge beside Lake Naragang where he and Billy had fought. And it was there, on the spot, that he had recalled the crystal; and so he had reluctantly gone to the library, aware of the

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weapon, trained on him all the while he had talked to the young woman at the desk.

Abruptly remembering that conversation, Seth said desperately, "Maybe that woman librarian—"

"Maybe," said the other, noncommittally.

He untied Seth's hands and stepped back, motioning with the gun. They went out to the car and drove off.

As they came to the lake the man said, "Pull over." After Seth complied, the shot rang out and the murder was done.

The killer dragged the body to a cliff overlooking the lake, tied rocks to it and dumped it into the deep water below.

He actually drove on to New York, left the car in Seth's parking lot and, after spending the night in New York, prepared to return to Harkdale.

During that night Edith Price slept restlessly, and dreamed that all possible Edith Prices marched past her bed. Only half a dozen of those Ediths were married and even in her dream that shocked her.

Worse, there was a long line of Edith Prices who ranged from fat to blowsy to downright shifty-eyed and mentally ill. However, several of the Ediths had a remarkable high-energy look and that was reassuring.

She woke to the sound of the phone ringing.

The library caretaker said, "Hey, Miss Price, better get down here. Somebody broke in last night."

Edith had a strange, unreal feeling.

She asked, "Broke into the library?"

"Yep. Biggest mess is in the museum. Whoever it was musta thought some of the stones in there were the real stuff. They're scattered all over the floor."

II

TO Edith Price, the lean young man in overalls was just another inarticulate farmer.

She wrote down his name—Seth Mitchell. A moment went by as the name hit her. She looked up.

The haunted face that stared back at her had been burned by sun and wind. Its cheeks were gaunt. The eyes were sick. Nevertheless, the man bore a sensational resemblance to the Seth Mitchell of yesterday, it seemed to Edith.

She thought, a light dawning: *This is the Seth Mitchell Tilsit knew about . . .*

There had to be a Mitchell clan, with cousins and such, who were look-alikes.

Her mind was still fumbling over the possibilities when she realized the import of the words he had mumbled.

Edith echoed, "A stone? A crystal you presented to the library museum twenty-five years ago?"

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He nodded. Edith compressed her lips.

All right, let's get to the bottom of this . . .

During the moments of her confusion the man had taken a bill out of his billfold. As he held it out to her she saw that it was twenty dollars.

She had recovered her self-control and now said conversationally, "That's a lot of money for a worthless rock."

"It's the one I want," he muttered. She didn't hear several words that followed but then he said clearly, ". . . the time Billy disappeared."

A silence fell while Edith absorbed the impact of the notion that here indeed was the original Seth Mitchell.

"I've heard about Billy," she said finally. "A very unusual incident."

Seth Mitchell said, "I yelled at him to get away and he vanished." He spoke tautly. His eyes were an odd, discolored gray from remembered shock. He spoke again: "We both grabbed at it. Then he was gone."

He seemed only dimly aware of her presence. He went on, and it was as if he were talking to himself: "It was so shiny. Not like it became later. It went all drab and nobody would believe me."

He paused. Then, intently: "All these years I've been thinking. I've been awful slow to see the truth. But last night it came to me. What else could have made Billy disappear when I called him? What else but the stone?"

Edith decided uneasily that this was a problem for a psychiatrist, not a librarian. It struck her that the simplest solution would be to give this Seth Mitchell the worthless rock he wanted.

But of course that would have to be carefully done. Her one indiscretion so far had been her questioning of Tilsit the day before about Seth Mitchell. Throughout the police investigation of the breaking and entering of the library museum she had maintained a careful silence about her own involvement.

So the sooner she got rid of the stone the better.

"If you'll give me your address," she requested gently, "I'll ask the head librarian and perhaps she'll get in touch with you."

The address he reluctantly gave her was a rural route out of Abbotsville.

She watched him then, wondering a little, as he shuffled off to the door and outside.

On her way home that night, Edith drove by way of the motel. The gold Cadillac was gone.

SHE had her usual late dinner. Then, after making sure the apartment door was locked, she took the paper bag from under the sink—and noticed at once, un-

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easily, that there was less dirt in the bag.

A momentary fear came to her that the stone would be gone. She spread a newspaper and hastily emptied the bag, dirt and all, onto it. As the earth tumbled out a brilliance of color flashed at her.

Wonderingly she picked up the beautiful gem.

"But it's impossible," she whispered. "That was dull. This is—beautiful!"

It glittered in her hand. The purple color was alive, as if thousands of moving parts turned and twisted inside the stone. Here and there in its depths a finger of light stirred up a nest of scarlet fire. The crisscross of color and flame flickered so brightly that Edith felt visually stunned.

She held it up against the light—and saw a design inside.

Somebody had cut a relief map of the solar system into the interior of the stone, and had colored it. It was quite a good example—it seemed to Edith—of the cutter's art. The purple and red over-all effect seemed to derive from the play of light through the coloring of the tiny "sun" and its family of planets.

She took the stone back to the sink. There was a fantasy in her mind, she realized, in which she pictured the jewel as having magic powers. Remembering what the farmer Seth Mitchell had said about his having yelled at Billy Bingham in the presence of the stone . . . maybe the sound of a human voice would have an effect . . .

She tried speaking.

Nothing happened. The picture remained unchanged. She spelled words, articulating each letter.

Nothing.

She ran the gamut of sounds possible to her own voice from a low contralto to a ridiculously piercing soprano—nothing.

Once more she noticed the design inside and held the stone up against the light to see it better. She was visually tracing the outline of the solar system in the crystal when she had a sudden thought and, with abrupt determination, said in a clear voice: "Billy Bingham—the boy—I want him back—now!"

After she had spoken, during the silent moments that followed, she felt progressively foolish.

Of the long-missing Billy there was no sign.

Thank God; she thought breathlessly.

EDITH rose early the next morning; her mind was made up. It was time she got rid of something that was threatening to undermine her good sense.

As she took the crystal out of the flowerpot, she saw that the interior scene had changed. It was now a human body outlined in purple and red points of light.

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The outline, she saw presently, was actually extremely detailed, showing the bone structure and the principal organs. There was even a faint glow which suffused the shape, suggesting a fine mask of nerves and blood vessels.

She was examining it absorbedly when she abruptly realized what she was doing.

Firmly, she put the stone into a small box, filled it with new soil—crystals, she had read, needed nutrients—wrapped it and addressed it to Seth Mitchell, Rural Route 4, Abbotsville.

Shortly she was driving to the post office. It was not until after she had mailed the package that her first realization came that she had done it again. Once more she had acted on impulse.

Too late, the cautioning thought came: Suppose Seth Mitchell wrote the library a note of thanks. It would be impossible for Edith to explain how a romantic compulsion had motivated her to steal the crystals—and how, in the light of later events, her only desire had become to dispose of the evidence.

Why don't I just get on the next bus to New York and leave this crazy little town forever?

The moment was extremely depressing. She remembered an endless series of wrong decisions in her life. She sat there in her car at the curb and thought of her first young man at college. The first, that is, who had been truly hers. She had lost him through an impulse: she had been caught by the God-is-dead-so-now-you're-God movement. In the movement what you did to other people no longer mattered—you never had to feel guilty.

If I hadn't joined the guilt-free generation, right now I would be Mrs. Richard Staples . . .

The realization reminded her of her dream of the multitude of Edith Prices and the unique remembrance escalated her out of her apathy. What an odd concept. She laughed involuntarily, and thought that sending the crystal to the least of all possible Seth Mitchells had not been good sense.

Thinking about that, her fear faded. How funny! And what an odd dream to have had.

How could one ever know what way was best, what decision, what philosophy, how much exercise? And, best for what?

EDITH was already at her desk in the library when Tilsit came in with the look on her face. In her six months in Harkdale, Edith had come to recognize Tilsit's expression of: *I've got special information.*

"Did you see the paper, Edith?"

Edith presumed the paper referred to was the *Harkdale Inquirer*, a four-page daily. She herself still read the *New York Times*, though she loyally subscribed to the local sheet. She had

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not read today's *Inquirer*, however, and said so.

"Remember asking me the other day about a man called Seth Mitchel?" Tilsit asked.

Edith remembered only too well but she put on a blank face.

Tilsit unfolded the paper in her hands and held it up. The headline was:

BILLY BINGHAM FOUND?

Edith reached automatically and Tilsit handed the paper to her. Edith read:

> A 12-year old boy staggered out of the brush near Lake Naragang shortly after ten P.M. last night and tried to enter the house where Billy Bingham lived twenty-five years ago. The present tenant, John Hildeck, a carpenter, took the bewildered youngster to the police station. From there he was transported to the hospital.

That was as far as Edith read. Her body bent to one side, her arms flopped limply. She stooped over and the floor crashed into her.

When she came out of her faint on the cot in the rest room, the remembrance was still there, bright and hard and improbable, of how she had commanded the crystal to bring back Billy Bingham—somewhere between nine and ten the previous night.

III

MIAMI. The Seth Mitchell in that singing city had a private vocabulary in which he called God (or, as he sometimes thought of Him, Nature or Fate). The Musician. Within this exclusive terminology Seth's own life had been tuneful and the music a symphony —or at least a concerto.

Somebody up there evidently regarded him as a suitable instrument.

For he had money, girl friends, a fabulous career as a gambler on the edge of the underworld—all without restrictions, for his orchestra was well disciplined and responsive to his baton. Not bad for a small-town boy who had not learned the melodies of city life until he was past twenty.

But now, suddenly, The Musician had sounded a sour note.

Mitchell had in his hand the *Harkdale Inquirer* containing the account of the return of Billy Bingham.

He studied the newspaper's photograph of a frightened boy about twelve years old. The subject looked like Billy Bingham—and didn't. Mitchell was surprised that he wasn't sure. The *Inquirer* apologized for having lost its photocut of the real Billy, and explained that Billy's parents had moved—to Texas, it was believed. No one knew precisely where.

The news story concluded: "The

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only other person who might be able to identify the claimant is Seth Mitchell, Billy's boyhood chum. Mitchell's present address is unknown."

Mitchell thought sarcastically that the *Inquirer* ought to examine its out-of-state subscription list.

The next day as he walked into room 312 of the Harkdale Hospital, he saw the youngster in bed put down his magazine and look up.

Mitchell said with a reassuring smile, "Billy, you don't have to worry about me. I'm here as your friend."

The boy said uneasily, "That's what the big man told me, and then he got nasty."

Mitchell didn't ask who the big man was. A chair stood near the bed. He drew it up, and said gently, "Billy, what seemst to have happened to you is almost like a fairy story. But the most important thing is that you mustn't worry."

Billy bit his lip and a tear rolled down his cheek. "They're treating me as if I'm lying. The big man said I'd be put in jail if I didn't tell the truth."

Mitchell's mind leaped back to the days when he had been questioned by just such impatient individuals abou the disappearance of Billy. His lips tightened.

He said, "No hing like that is going to happen tc you if I can help it. But I'd like to ask you a few questions that maybe nobody else thought of. You don't have to answer if you don't want to. How does that strike you?"

"Okay."

Mitchell took that for a go-ahead signal. "What kind of clothes was Seth wearing?"

"Brown corduroy pants and a gray shirt."

Reality rather than the boy's answer gave Mitchell his first disappointment. He had hoped the description would jog his memory. It didn't. He was unable to recall what particular pair of ragged trousers he had worn on that distant day of Billy's disappearance.

"You wore corduroys also?" It was a shot in the dark.

"They're in there." The boy pointed at the chest in one corner.

Mitchell stood up, opened the indicated drawer and lifted out a skimpy pair of cheap corduroys. He examined them shamefacedly but with an eye to detail. He put them back finally, disappointed. The identifying label had been torn off. He couldn't remember ever having seen them before.

Twenty-five years, he thought drearily. The time was like a thick veil with a few tattered holes in it. Through the holes he could catch glimpses of his past, instants out of his life, each one illuminated because it had once had some particular momentary impact—none was fully visible in context.

"Billy—" Mitchell came back to his chair, intent—"you mentioned

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trying to grab a shining stone. Where did you first see it?"

"On the ledge. There's a path that comes up from the lake."

"Had you come up that way before?"

The other shook his head. "A few times when it was cold. Usually Seth and I liked to stay near the water."

Mitchell nodded. He remembered that. "This bright stone you saw—how big was it?"

"Oh, it was big."

"An inch?"

"Bigger. Five inches, I'll betcha." Billy's face was bright with certainty.

Mitchell paused to argue out the error of that with himself. The stone had been roughly two and a half inches at its longest, and somewhat narrower and thinner. A boy who had had only a glimpse would not be the best judge of its size.

The reasoning made Mitchell uneasy. He was making excuses where none should be allowed. He hesitated. He wanted to find out if Billy had actually touched the crystal but he didn't quite know how to lead up to the question. He began, "According to what you told the paper, you admitted that your chum—what's his name?" He waited.

"Seth. Seth Mitchell."

"Seth Mitchell saw the stone first. But you still tried to get it, didn't you?"

The boy swallowed. "I didn't mean any harm."

Mitchell had not intended to imply moral disapproval. He said hastily, "It's all right, Billy. When I was a boy the guy who got a thing owned it. None of this seeing-first stuff for us."

He smiled.

Billy said, "I only wanted to be the one who gave it to the museum."

THE thunder of that vibrated through Mitchell's mind.

Of course, now I remember . . .

He even realized why he had forgotten. The library's museum room had accepted the stone—which had lost its brilliance during the days he had carried it in his pocket—with reluctance. The librarian had murmured something about not discouraging small boys. With those words she had discouraged him so completely that he had needed an actual naming of the fact to remember it.

It was hard to believe an imposter would be able to cite this boy's detailed recollections. And yet, that meant that Billy Bingham, when he disappeared, had—

His brain poised, stopped by the impossibility of this situation. His own doctor had already told him that mental disturbances were often traced to overactive imaginations.

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Mitchell drew a deep breath. "All right. Now, two more questions. What time of day was it?"

"Seth and I went swimming after school," said Billy. "So it was late afternoon.

"Okay. According to the paper you didn't get back to your house until nearly ten. Where were you from late afternoon till ten o'clock at night?"

"I wasn't anywhere," said Billy. "Seth and I were fighting over the stone. I fell. And when I picked myself up it was pitch dark." He was suddenly tearful. "I don't know what happened. I guess he just left me lying there, somehow."

Mitchell rose to his feet, thinking suddenly: *This is ridiculous. I ought to have my head examined . . .*

Nevertheless he paused at the door and flung one more question toward the bed, "Has anyone else called you—besides the police, I mean, and the big man—and me?"

"Just a woman from the library."

"Library?" Mitchell echoed blankly.

"She wanted to know the exact time I woke up beside the lake. Her name is Edith Price and she works in the library. Of course—I didn't know."

The information seemed meaningless. Mitchell said quickly, simulating a friendliness he no longer felt, "Well, Billy, I guess I'd better let you get back to your comic book. Thanks a lot."

He went out of the room and out of the hospital. He paid his bill at the hotel, got into his rented car, drove to the airport and flew back to Miami. By the time the plane landed, the old, disturbing music from his childhood had faded from his mind.

It seemed to Mitchell that The Musician had let him down. To insure that it never happened again, he resolved to cancel his subscription to the *Harkdale Inquirer.*

CHICAGO. Seth Mitchell (of the Seth Mitchell Detective Agency) stared at the man who had just walked into his office as if he were seeing a hallucination.

Finally he blinked and asked, "Am I crazy?"

The stranger, a well set up young man in his mid-thirties, sat down in the visitor's chair and said with an enigmatic smile, "The resemblance is remarkable, isn't it?"

He spoke in a firm baritone and, except that both of them knew better, Mitchell could have sworn the voice was his own.

In fact, afterward, telling Marge Aikens about the visitor, he confessed, "I kept feeling that it was me sitting there."

"But what did he want?" Marge asked. She was a slim blonde taking her first look at thirty and taking it well. Mitchell intended to

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marry her some day when he could find another associate as efficient. "What did he look like?"

"Me. That's what I'm trying to tell you. He was my spitting image. He even wore a suit that reminded me of one I've got at home." He pleaded uneasily, "Don't be too hard on me, Marge. I went to pieces. It's all vague."

"Did he give you his address?"

Mitchell looked down unhappily at the interview sheet. "It's not written down."

"Did he say if he intended to come to the office again?"

"No, but he gave me a thousand dollars in bills and I gave him a receipt. So we're committed."

"To what?"

"That's the silliest part of it. He wants me to find an onyx crystal. He says he saw it quite a while back in a small-town museum south of New York. He can't remember just where."

"That's going to be either very hard or very easy." Marge was thoughtful; she seemed to be considering the problem involved.

"Let me finish," said Mitchell grimly. "I know where the crystal is. Just think of what I said. I know that region like a book. I was born there, remember?"

"It had slipped my mind," said Marge. "You think you can locate the crystal because—"

Mitchell said, "It's in the museum annex of the public library in the town of Harkdale, where I was born. And now—get this. I presented the crystal to the library and, what's even more amazing, I dreamed about that stone the other night."

Marge did not let him get off the subject. "And he came to you? Out of the scores of detective agencies in Chicago, he came to the one man in the world who looks like him and who knows where that crystal is?"

"He came to me."

Marge was pursing her beautiful lips. "Seth, this is fantastic. You shouldn't have let him get away. You're usually so sharp."

"Thanks." Dryly.

"Why didn't you just tell him where it is."

"And lose a thousand dollars? My dear, a detective is sometimes like a doctor. People pay him for information he already has."

Marge held out her hand. "Let me see that interview sheet."

As she read it she asked without looking up, "What are you going to do?"

"Well, I told him the truth, that I've got several days' work to get rid of and then—"

He fell silent and the silence grew so long that Marge finally looked up. She was relieved at the expression on his face, for it was the shrewd, reasoning look that was always there when he was at his detective best.

He caught her glance, said, "It would be a mistake to appear in

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Harkdale until three or four mysteries have been cleared up. Like how come there's two of us—"

"You have no relations?"

"Some cousins."

"Ever see them?"

He shook his head. "Not since I was around nineteen, when my mother died." He smiled grimly. "Harkdale is not a town you go back to. But kill that thought you've got. None of my cousins looked like me." He shuddered. "Ugh, no."

Marge said firmly, "I think when you do finally go, you ought to be disguised."

"You can count on it—even you won't know me."

ELSEWHERE on earth about two dozen of the total of 1811 Seth Mitchells—among whom was the best of all possible Seth Mitchells—also considered the crystal, remembered their dreams of a few nights earlier and had a strange, tense conviction of an imminent crisis.

As Seth Mitchell in Montreal, Canada, described it to his French-Canadian wife, "I can't get over the feeling that I'm going to have to measure up. Remember, I mentioned that to you when I awoke the other morning."

His wife, a pretty blonde, who had a French-Canadian woman's practical contempt for dream fantasies, remembered it well and wanted to know what he had to measure up to.

Her husband said unhappily, "I have a feeling I could have made better decisions, made more of myself. I am not the man I could have been."

"So what?" she wanted to know. "Who is? And what of it."

"*Kaput*." He shrugged. "I'm sorry to be so negative, my dear. But that's the feeling. Since I didn't measure up, I'm through."

His wife sighed. "My mother warned me that all men get crazy ideas as they approach forty. And here you are."

"I should have been braver—or something," he moaned.

"What's wrong with being a tax consultant?" she demanded.

Her husband seemed not to hear. "I have a feeling I ought to visit my home town."

She grabbed his arm. "You're going straight to Dr. Ledoux," she said. "You need a checkup."

Dr. Ledoux could find nothing wrong. "In fact, you seem to be in exceptionally good health."

The Seth Mitchell of Montreal had to concede that his sudden alarm was pretty ridiculous.

But he decided to visit Harkdale as soon as he cleared up certain business.

IV

THE man's voice came suddenly, tinged with a slight foreign

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accent, "Miss Price, I want to talk to you."

Edith saw the speaker dimly in the darkness and realized that he stood in the shadows between the garage and the rooming house where she lived, barring her way.

Before she could speak the voice continued, "What did you do with the crystal?"

"I—don't—understand."

She spoke the words automatically. She could see her interrogator more clearly now. He was short and broad of build. Abruptly she recognized him as the man who had been with the Seth Mitchell look-alike in the gold Cadillac.

"Miss Price, you removed that crystal from the display cabinet. Either give it to me or tell me what you did with it and that'll be the end of the matter."

Edith had the tense feeling of a person who has acted unwisely and who therefore cannot possibly make any admissions, not even to a stranger.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she whispered.

"Look, Miss Price—" The man stepped out of the shadows. His tone was conciliatory. "Let's go into your apartment and talk this over."

His proposal relieved her. For her apartment was only a little suite in a rooming house in which the other tenants were never more than a wall away.

Incredibly — afterward she thought of it as incredible—she was instantly trusting and started past him. Her surprise when he grabbed her was total. One of his arms imprisoned both of hers and her body.

He put a hard, unyielding palm over her mouth and whispered, "I've got a gun."

Nearly paralyzed by the threat, she was aware of her captor carrying her toward the back alley. She allowed him to shove her—without a struggle—into a car that was parked against a fence.

He climbed in beside her and sat there in the near-dark of the night, gazing at her. She could not make out the expression on his face. But as the seconds went by, and he made no threatening move, her heart slowed in its rapid beating.

She finally gasped, "Who are you? What do you want?"

THE man chuckled sardonically and said, "I'm the worst of all possible Athtars from the thirty-fifth century. But I turned out to have a high survival faculty."

Edith was again unable to speak.

His voice tightened. "Where I come from I'm a physicist. I sensed my danger and I worked out a key aspect of the nature of the crystal in record time. In dealing with human beings, it operates on the vibrations a body puts forth from all its cells. In recreating that vibration, it creates the person.

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Conversely, in canceling the vibration, it uncreates him. Recognizing this—and since I was not of its orientation in my era—I simply put up a barrier on the total vibration level of my own body and thus saved my life when it uncreated all the lesser Athtars."

Now she did not want to speak and the man added somberly: "But evidently, by defeating it, I remained attached to it on some other level. As it fell back through time to the twentieth century I fell with it. Not—unfortunately—to where and when it went. Instead—I arrived last week beside that ledge overlooking Lake Naragang." He finished in a wondering tone: "What a remarkable, intricate internal energy flow system it must have. Imagine! In passing through time it must have detected this twenty-five-year inactive period and its reawakening—and dropped me off within days of its own reactivation."

The voice became silent and there was nothing but the darkness again. Edith ventured a small movement—she changed her position on the seat to ease a growing discomfort in one leg.

When there was no counter movement from him she whispered, "Why are you telling me this? "It all sounds perfectly insane."

Even as she uttered the obvious she realized that a quality of equal madness in herself believed every word that he had spoken. She thought in a spasm of self-criticism: *I really must be one of the lesser Edith Prices.*

She had to fight to suppress an outburst of hysterical laughter.

"From you," said the worst of all possible Athtars, "I want information."

"I don't know anything about a crystal."

"The information I want," said the man in an inexorable voice, "is this: At any time recently have you had a thought about wishing you had taken a different path in life instead of ending up in Harkdale as a librarian?"

EDITH'S mind flashed back to her series of impulses after she had mailed the crystal—and back farther.

"Why, yes," she breathed.

"Tell me about one of them," said the man.

She told him of the impulse she had had to simply get on a bus or train and leave Harkdale.

The man leaned back in the seat. He seemed surprisingly relaxed.

He asked with a chuckle, "Are you the best of all possible Edith Prices?"

Edith made no reply. She was beginning to have the feeling that perhaps she should confide in this man—should tell him where the crystal was.

Athtar was speaking again. "I have a conviction that the Edith

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Price who is the twentieth-century orientation for the crystal is on that bus or is heading for safety somewhere else. And that therefore you are under the same threat as I am—of being uncreated as soon as the crystal selects the perfect Edith Price."

For Edith, terror began at that moment.

During the minutes that followed she was only vaguely aware of words mumbling out of her mouth.

Listening to her revelation, Athtar suppressed an impulse to murder her out of hand. He played it cautiously, thinking that if anything went wrong, this Edith was all he had to help him to trace the other Ediths.

So he spoke reassuring words, put her out of the car, and watched her as she staggered off—safe, she thought.

THE note read: "He wasn't there. It wasn't there. The farm was deserted. Did you lie to me? Athtar."

Edith felt a chill the first time she read the words. Particularly she reacted to the last line with fear. But on her tenth or twelfth reading, she was more determined.

She thought: *If this whole crazy business is real I'd better—What?*

Be brave? Consider the problem? Act with decisiveness?

It was Saturday.

Before going to work she bought a small Browning .25 automatic at the Harkdale Hardware. She had often gone target practicing with the second of her two college boy friends, the one who had sold her on the philosophy that God was dead and that therefore one need only avoid jail—and otherwise do anything one pleased. Eventually he departed without marrying her, presumably feeling guiltless about having lured her away from a man who might have offered her a wedding ring.

But this man did show her how to shoot an automatic firearm. She put the little pistol into her purse—and felt a hardening of her conviction that it was time *this* Edith started measuring up.

One doubt remained: was willingness to shoot in self-defense a step forward—or a step away—from being the best of all possible Edith Prices?

At the library that day, Tilsit was waiting for her with another news item:

YOUNG FARMER MISSING

Seth Mitchell, Abbotsville farmer, has not been at his farm for several days. A neighbor, Carey Grayson, called on Mitchell yesterday to buy seed grain, found the Mitchel cows unmilked, a horse in the stable starving, chickens unfed and no sign of life around the house.

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Grayson fed the animals, then contacted Mitchell's cousin in a neighboring county and notified the sheriff's office. An investigation is under way.

Edith handed back the paper with a meaningless comment. But she was thinking: *So that's what Athtar discovered . . .*

In spite of her resolve she trembled. It seemed to her that there was no turning back; she must carry forward inexorably with all the thoughts that she had had.

Sunday.

She had driven to New York, and parked two blocks from the little hotel for women only where she had formerly lived. Surely, she told herself, that was where at least one Edith duplicate would have gone.

From a phone booth she called the hotel and asked for Edith Price. There was a pause, then, "I'm ringing," said the woman desk clerk.

Instantly breathless, Edith hung up. She sagged limply inside the booth, eyes closed. It was not clear to her even now what she had expected.

Can it be that I'm the only Edith who knows that there are others? And does that give me an advantage over the unknowing ones?

Or was there already somewhere an Edith Price who had naturally become the best of them all?

Her thought ended. She realized that a short, stocky man was standing beside the booth, partly out of her line of vision. Something about him was familiar.

She straightened and turned.

Athtar.

THE Edith Price who stepped out of the phone booth was still shaky and still not brave. But two days of fear and threat and gulps of terror had transformed her. She had been a vaguely sad, wish-my-mistakes-won't-doom-me young woman. Now she trembled with anxiety at times, but at other times she compressed her lips and had thoughts that were tough and realistic.

The sight of Athtar caromed her into anxiety.

Which was just as well, the tough part of her assessed realistically. She did not trust the worst of all possible Athtars. And he would feel safer with a frightened Edith, she was sure.

Seen close in broad daylight on a deserted New York street on Sunday morning, Athtar—short, broad, with a thick face and gray cheeks—was surprisingly as she remembered him—totally unprepossessing.

He said softly, "Why don't you let me talk to her?"

Edith scarcely heard. The first question of her 48-hour stop-only-for-sleep, stream of consciousness, siphoned through her voice,

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"Are you really from the thirty-fifth century?"

He gave her a quick, shrewd look, must have realized how wound up she was and said receptively, "Yes."

"Are they all like you?"

"It was decided," said Athtar in a formal tone, "that a body built thicker and closer to the ground has more utility. That was several hundred years before I was born. And so, yes. No one is over sixteen hundred and seventy-five centimeters—that is, five feet, six inches."

"How do you know you're the worst of all possible Athtars?"

"In my time," was the reply, "it is a felony for anyone but a member of the Scientists' Guild to have a weapon. Hence, political and economic power is part of the prize of the struggle for position in the Guild. On my way to becoming a tougher member, I wished many times to be relatively safe among the faceless, unarmed masses. And the crystal, in creating other Athtars, solidified those wishes."

There was an implication here that getting tougher was not the answer, not the way. Edith sighed her disappointment and remembered her other questions. She told him about the two pictures she had seen in the crystal, the one of the solar system and the other the outline of a human body. Did he know what the pictures meant?

"When I first saw the crystal," said Athtar, "the scene inside was of our galaxy. Later it became the solar system. So what you saw was probably a carryover from my time, where we occupy all the planets. And what I saw must derive from a time when man has moved out to the galaxy. It could mean that the crystal adjusts to the era in which it finds itself. Though why a human being instead of the planet Earth in this era is not obvious. Was the outline that of a woman or a man?

Edith couldn't remember.

Standing there in the bright, sunny day and on the dirty, narrow street, Athtar shook his head. There was awe in his ugly face. He said wonderingly, "Such a small object; such a comprehensive ability." He added, half to himself, "It has to be based on potential flow patterns. There are not enough atoms in such a crystal to act as a control board for so much."

He had already, by implication, answered her next question but she asked it anyway.

Athtar sighed, "No, the crystal is definitely not from the thirty-fifth century. It appeared suddenly. I picture it as having fallen backward through time from some future era in drops of fifteen hundred years."

"But why would they have sent it back?" Edith asked, bewildered. "What are they after?"

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The chunky little man gave her a startled look. "The idea of the crystal's having been sent back for a purpose had not previously occurred to me. It's such a colossally valuable machine that we assumed it got away from them accidentally," he said. He was silent. Then, finally: "Why don't you let me go to see this second Edith Price? And you go back to Harkdale? If I find the crystal, I'll report with it to you there."

The implication seemed to be that he planned to cooperate with her. What he meant was that the crystal would be no good to him until he had found and murdered the Edith to whom it was oriented.

THE tough part of Edith hesitated at the idea of trusting this man. But it occurred to her that he might have his century's weapons and that therefore he was being generous from a position of total strength in offering to cooperate.

With such fear thoughts in her mind and having no plans of her own, she agreed.

She watched him get into a shining new automobile and drive down the narrow street. It was a medium-sized car, she noted absently. She had never been one who kept track of auto designs, so by the time she wondered what make it was it was gone. Belatedly it also struck her that she ought to have looked at the license plate numbers.

She thought sarcastically: *What a third-rate Edith Price I am . . .*

She was vaguely aware of a car pulling up at the curb nearby. A young woman left it and casually walked toward her as if to go into the phone booth.

She stopped suddenly beside Edith.

"You're Miss Price?"

Edith turned.

The other woman was a bright, alert blonde, probably in her thirties. Edith had never seen her before. She had no sense of being threatened but involuntarily she backed away several steps.

"Yes," she said.

The woman turned toward the car and called, "Okay, Seth."

Seth Mitchell emerged from the car and came rapidly toward them. He was well dressed, like the Seth Mitchell in the gold Cadillac, but there was a subtle difference. His face had a firmer, more determined expression.

He said, "I'm a detective. Who is that man you were talking to?"

And so the story, as well as Edith knew it, was presently shared.

THEY had gone into a coffee shop for their tense discussion. Edith was both relieved and disturbed to discover that these detectives had been in Harkdale for two days and had traced her down as a result of her call to the hospital to inquire about Billy Bingham. Having thus spotted her,

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they had become aware that the squat man was also keeping track of her movements. And so that morning, not one but three cars had headed for New York—Edith's, Athtar's and theirs.

The exchange of information took time and several cups of coffee—though Edith rejected the final cup with the sudden realization that coffee was probably not good for people and that the crystal might judge her on it at some later time. She smiled wanly at how many restraints she was placing on herself. Exactly as if God were no longer dead.

When they came out of the restaurant Seth Mitchell phoned the other Edith Price. He emerged from the phone booth uneasy.

"The switchboard operator says that Miss Price left with a man about twenty minutes ago. I'm afraid we're too late."

From Edith's description he had already come to the conclusion that Athtar was a dangerous man. They decided to wait for the second Edith to return. But though they remained in New York until after eleven that night the young woman did not come back to her hotel.

SHE never would return. For some hours, a bullet in her brain, her body, weighed down by stones, had been lying at the bottom of the East River.

And Athtar had the crystal.

To his intense disappointment, that Edith was not the crystal's orientation.

Accordingly, he spent the evening and a portion of the night fitting together parts in the construction of a special weapon. He had a peculiar prescience that he would need its power the following day against the Edith who, he believed, was back in Harkdale.

V

EDITH Price and the detectives set out for Harkdale in the two cars. Seth Mitchell, at Edith's request, drove her car. Marge Aikens followed in the larger machine.

En route Mitchell told Edith that he believed she was the original Edith and that it was to her that the crystal was still oriented. He considered also that her conclusion that Seth Mitchell, the farmer, was the worst Seth had doomed that unfortunate Mitchell duplicate. The crystal accepted her judgment and probably uncreated Seth, the farmer, when the package with the crystal addressed to him had barely been deposited in the post office.

Edith was taken aback by the detective's logic.

"But" she stammered, "I didn't mean it that way." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Oh, that poor man!"

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"Of course you didn't mean it," Mitchell said. "Just to double-check—tell me again in what sequence did that judgment of yours come? Was it before or after your various impulses to leave Harkdale?"

"Oh, after."

"And did I hear you correctly—you thought of going into the post office and asking for the package you had mailed to be returned to you?"

"Yes, I had that thought." She added; "But I didn't do it."

"I would guess that at least one other Edith did go back and get it," said Mitchell.

"But it's all so complicated," Edith said. "How would any Edith just go, leaving clothes, money, car?"

"I've been thinking of my own background on that," said Mitchell. "Evidently the crystal can excise all confusions like that. For example, I never again even thought of going back to Harkdale. To do so didn't even cross my mind. But there are no blanks like that in your mind?"

"None that I can identify or think of."

Seth Mitchell nodded. "That's how I heard you. I think I've got the solution to this whole crazy business—and we don't even have to know where the crystal is."

His reasoning was simple. In bringing back Billy Bingham at her command the crystal had deposited the boy nearly two miles away. At the time she had been holding the crystal in her hand. But her negative thought about Farmer Seth Mitchell had occurred after she had mailed the crystal and was approximately a hundred yards from the post office.

So if she had indeed uncreated the mentally ill farmer, then the distance of the crystal's human orientation—in this instance one of the Edith Prices—from the crystal, was not a factor.

"You don't agree?" asked the detective.

"I'm thinking," Edith said. "Maybe I'm not really the orientation."

"We'll test that tomorrow."

"What about Athtar?" Edith asked. "I keep feeling that he may have special weapons. Besides, the crystal cannot affect him. What about that?"

"Let me think about Athtar."

While he thought, Edith remembered Athtar's asking her about the figure in the crystal: had it been a man's or a woman's? She sat there in the darkness next to this Seth Mitchell and became aware of two separate lines of thought in her mind.

The first: she attempted to visualize the human design in the crystal.

The second . . .

SHE watched his profile as he drove.

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How brilliant he is—yet surely a mere detective, no matter how keen his logic, cannot be the best of all possible Seth Mitchells. A man in such a profession has got to be somewhere in the middle—which in this competition is the same as the worst . . .

And he disappeared.

For many seconds after she had that thought, the suddenly driverless car held to its straight direction. Its speed, which had been around seventy, naturally started to let up the instant there was no longer a foot on the accelerator.

The only error came when Edith uttered a scream and grabbed at the wheel, turning it. The machine careened wildly. The next second she grasped it in a more steadying way and, holding it, slid along the seat into a position where presently she could apply the brake. She pulled over to the side of the road and stopped.

Marge Aikens had slowed as soon as she saw there was a problem. She pulled up behind Edith, got out of the car and walked to the driver's side of the other machine.

"Seth," she began, "what—"

Edith pushed the door open and stepped, trembling, out to the road. She had a mad impulse to run—anywhere. Her body felt strange. Her mind was encased in blank anguish. She was vaguely aware of herself babbling about what had happened.

It must have taken a while for her incoherent words to reach through to Marge. But suddenly Marge gasped and Edith felt herself grabbed by the shoulders. She was being shaken.

A voice was yelling at her, "You stupid fool! You stupid fool—"

The shaking became pain. Her neck hurt, then her arms.

I must be careful. I mustn't do or say anything that will affect her . .

With the thought Edith's sanity returned. Marge was in a state of hysteria. The shaking was actually an automatic act of a person out of her mind with grief.

Edith knew pity. She was able to free herself by a simple action. She slapped Marge lightly on the cheek, once, twice, three times. The third time the woman let go of her and leaned against the car, sobbing.

A wind was blowing from the west. Car headlights kept glaring past them, lighting the scene briefly. The two women were now in a relatively normal state and presently were able to discuss their situation. Edith tried to recreate Marge's employer with the same command she had used to bring back Billy Bingham.

She had had a feeling that it would not work—the Seth Mitchells were undoubtedly due to be eliminated one by one—and it did not. The minutes ticked by. Though she yelled the command in many variations into the night

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there was no sign of the vanished Seth, whose presence had for a long half-day brought to the whole situation the reassurance that derives from a highly intelligent and determined mind.

In the end, defeated, the two women in their separate cars drove on to Harkdale. Marge had a room reserved at the Harkdale Hotel and went there. Edith drove wearily to the apartment house where she lived.

IT WAS nearly four o'clock when she finally limped into her little suite. She lay down without undressing. She was drifting off to sleep when fear tensed her. Would the best of all possible Ediths be this sloppy about personal cleanliness?

Literally hurting with exhaustion, she rolled off the bed, undressed, bathed, brushed her teeth, combed her hair, changed the linens and stepped into a clean pair of pajamas.

She awoke once with a bad start to the thought that conformity might not be her salvation. Such toiletry amenities as she had performed were products of early training and did not necessarily have anything to do with life as it should be lived.

She fell asleep imagining a series of rebel Ediths, each one of whom had some special characteristic that was noble and worthy.

The next time she awoke she saw daylight outside. It occurred to her that all her concepts, so compulsively visualized, were probably being created somewhere by the crystal. Undoubtedly there were already beatnik and hippie Ediths as well as rougher, tougher types.

For the first time she realized what a strange whirl of possibilities she had considered in the last thirty-six hours. Ediths who were hard-boiled and could coldly shoot to kill, or, conversely, were superfeminine, sweet, tantalizing temptresses.

"And it's all unnecessary," she whispered, lying there. "The decision will probably be made as arbitrarily as my own impulsive condemnation of the inarticulate farmer and the courageous—but presumably not perfect—detective."

Having no standards that applied to the twentieth century, the crystal had uncreated a powerful and good man on the passing judgment of the person to whom it had by chance become oriented. Accordingly, the future looked grim for all Seth Mitchells and Edith Prices, including the original.

AS SHE dressed she looked through her window at the distant blue waters of Lake Naragang and the downtown section that at one place, opposite the

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Harkdale Hotel, crowded the water's edge. Pretty little town, Harkdale. She remembered that on her arrival she had thought that at least here she could be more casual in her dress than she had been in New York. Then she gave a short, rueful laugh—she had come full circle during the night, back to the notion that appearance would count.

She put on her finest dress. Yet in some back closet of her brain lived a fearful conviction that all this was in vain. The crisis was imminent; she might be dead—uncreated—before this day was out.

It seemed ridiculous to go to work on the day you were going to die. But she went. As she moved about her duties Edith was conscious of her subdued manner. Twice, when she unthinkingly looked into the restroom mirror, she was startled by the pale face and sick eyes that looked back at her.

This is not really me—I can't be judged on this . . .

Surely the crystal would not reject her because she was in a daze. Every passing minute fleeting images of other Ediths passed before her mind's eye. Each one had in it the momentary hope that maybe *it* held the key to the best. There was Edith living out her life as a nun; another chaste Edith, married but holding sex to a minimum, placing all her attention on her children, and an Edith who was a follower of Zen Buddhism.

She had, earlier, put through a call to Marge Aiken, at the Harkdale Hotel. About two o'clock Marge called back. She reported that she had phoned New York and discovered that the second Edith had not returned to her hotel at all the previous night.

After imparting this grim news, Marge said, "If Athtar contacts you—don't be alone with him under any circumstances until he produces the Seth Mitchell in the gold Cadillac and the Edith in New York."

After that call more images, mostly of saintly and good-hearted, unsophisticated Ediths haunted her.

Into this haze of thoughts, Tilsit's voice intruded: "Phone call for you, Edith."

She picked up the phone, heard a familiar voice—Athtar's.

"I want to see you right after work."

Edith said on a suddenly faint note, "At the Harkdale Hotel—in the lobby."

VI

ATHTAR left the phone booth. A smile twisted his wide face. For him there were two possibilities of victory now that he had the crystal.

The first was to kill its current orientation—Edith. He intended

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to take no chances with her. She would never, he resolved, reach the Harkdale Hotel.

However, murder of his only Edith left one unpleasant possibility. Though he had reasoned it out that she was the crystal's orientation—should she prove not to be, in destroying her—he would remove his source of information for tracing other Ediths.

It was a considered risk he had to take. As a precaution he had already removed the crystal from the nutrient soil on which it fed. He was not certain how long it would be before the stone was deactivated by starvation, but he deduced not more than two weeks. Whereupon it would orient to whoever reactivated it. To himself, of course.

Now that he had a special barrier-penetrating weapon, he firmly believed that before this day was over he would be in sole possession of the most remarkable machine of all time and space—the crystal.

THE Harkdale Hotel was a summer resort hostelry. Its prices were high and as a result it had made money. Some of the money had been spent wisely, on decoration, fine furniture and a sophisticated staff.

The clerk on day duty had his own definition of a sophisticate: a person with a memory so good that he can forget with discretion.

He was such a peron. His name was Derek Slade. And so discreet was he that on this fateful day he had allowed four Seth Mitchells to register without comment. He believed each Mitchell to be the same man but with a different woman and he was just beginning to enjoy the situation when Seth Mitchell arrived for the fifth time—this time without a woman.

Yet it took Derek only a moment to figure it out. This smooth male, Seth Mitchell, had four women in different rooms and evidently wanted a separate room for himself. Why? Derek did not try to analyze the matter further. Life—he had often said—was full of surprises.

He spoke in a low tone, "You may count on my discretion, Mr. Mitchell."

The Seth Mitchell across the desk from him raised his eyebrows, then nodded with a faint smile.

Derek was pleased. The remark ought to be good for a twenty-dollar tip.

He was still congratulating himself when the elevator door opened and another Seth Mitchell stepped out and walked toward the desk. As he came up, the Seth Mitchell who had just registered turned to follow the bellboy carrying his bags to the elevator.

The two Seth Mitchells almost bumped into each other. Both took evasive action. Both mur-

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mured polite nothings and were about to pass each other when Derek recovered.

It was one of his perfect moments. He raised his voice, spoke with exactly the correct note of authority.

"Mr. Mitchell."

The two Seth Mitchells were already in a mildly confused state. Their name, uttered in that peremptory tone, stopped them.

Derek said, "Mr. Seth Mitchell, may I present Mr. Seth Mitchell. Gentlemen, please wait there a moment."

He let them kill their own time—one seemed to recover quickly; the other remained bewildered—while he phoned the rooms of the previously registered Seth Mitchells. He had to call all four rooms but presently before him stood five Seth Mitchells.

Of all the people present the one most completely unnoticed was Derek Slade. He would not have had it any other way.

Four of the five Seths were gulping and stuttering at each other. The fifth had stepped to one side with a faint smile. Almost as one, the four suddenly became embarrassed.

Derek's cool voice reached them with perfect timing.

"Gentlemen, let me show you to the conference room, where you may talk over this whole matter."

As they started for the conference room, Marge Aiken entered the hotel in time to catch a profile view of the last Seth Mitchell walking into the room. She paled, then rushed forward.

"Seth—" she cried out tearfully. "For God's sake, I thought you were dead—"

She stopped. She had grabbed the nearest man by the arm. He turned and something unfamiliar about him flustered her.

AFTER all the Mitchells had been briefed by Marge to the extent of her knowledge she suggested that Edith be called to come over at once.

Three Seth Mitchells presented their view. Listening to each in turn, Marge glanced along the line of sensationally familiar faces and saw in all but one man's eyes a haunting apprehension—and the equally haunting intelligence she had seen so often in her employer's.

Seth from Montreal said, "Our first act must be to protect ourselves from that young woman's automatic judgments, such as she rendered on farmer Mitchell and detective Mitchell."

A second, slightly deeper-voiced Seth was concerned about Athtar. "In killing Edith Price Number Two, Athtar must have gotten the crystal and then discovered that the dead Edith was not the orientation. Therefore our initial act must be to protect the Edith who *is* the orientation. The first real problem is to get her safely to the

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hotel—not what she may do when she gets here."

The third Seth said the problem was not so much Edith's judgment of men; it was her stereotyped concept of women. Presumably, the crystal had dutifully created a long list of Edith Prices who were simply ordinary human beings with varying moral standards or with slightly different beliefs about how to get along in the drab world of the twentieth century.

"As an example of how differently I would want her to handle her control of the crystal—one of the first Edith Prices I would wish her to create is one that has ESP. Why? So that she can understand this whole situation and what to do about it."

His words brought a hopeful reaction. It was an obviously good idea—if it could be done.

A fourth Seth, who had sat gray and silent, now said, "It would be interesting if such ESP ability included being able to spot the Seth Mitchell who—" he nodded at Marge—"paid your boss a thousand dollars to locate the crystal."

The Seth who had arrived at the hotel without a wife—and who had reflected none of the fear that the others felt—stirred and smiled cheerfully.

"You need look no further. I'm he."

When order had been restored he continued: "To answer your basic question, I also dreamed—as you all did—and exactly as the worst Athtar found himself with the address of one of the Seth Mitchells in his mind, one morning after a dream the address of detective Mitchell was in mine."

"But why didn't you come for the crystal yourself? Why pay a thousand dollars?"

The bachelor Mitchell smiled again. "I hate to tell you people this—and it is to your advantage not to let Miss Price know—but according to the thoughts I had after my dream I am the best of all possible Seth Mitchells."

Once more he had to wait for order.

Then: "I don't know why I'm best. But I hired someone to come here in my place because I sensed danger and I came here today believing that this was the crisis. I can't tell you what I'll do about it. I don't even have the feeling that my role is decisive. I simply believe that a challenge will present itself and I'll meet it." He finished simply: "I don't think we should devote any more time to me. We have many vital things to do and we only have until Edith Price comes off the job to get them done. Let's go. First, since violence is imminent, we must warn the police—"

THE police of Harkdale were few in number and Athtar was able to drive into town and into

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the library parking lot without being observed. A lingering twilight had barely begun to turn to night when Edith emerged.

She noted with a vague surprise that a town fire truck, engine running, was standing near the door. But she was already having qualms about the forthcoming journey to the hotel—so far away, it seemed to her suddenly. So the sight of the big truck was reassuring.

To get to her own car, she had to go around the fire truck. As she started to do so the big machine surged into motion with a gigantic thunder of its engine. Edith stopped, teetered, then leaped back. The truck jammed on its brakes directly in front of her.

Somewhere beyond the big machine a purple flash had lighted the sky. Like a tracer bullet the light flashed from the auto to the fire truck. As it hit, it made a sound of a pitch never before heard on earth—a deep, sustained, continuing protest of chemical bonds by the quadrillion snapping in metal.

The tiny bullet penetrated the thick steel frame of the fire truck, and reformed itself a micromillimeter at a time from the steel molecules. It did not slow as it passed through the heavy machine. It would also have passed straight through Edith, except that its speed *was* that of a bullet—immense but finite.

It transited the fire truck while the truck was still in motion. The bullet was carried along inside the moving vehicle during a measurable fraction of a second and missed Edith by inches.

Unchecked, it struck the library wall, moved through, emerged from the far side and streaked into the night. Its kinetic energy being a precise quality, it bored forward another hundred yards and then rapidly fell.

Moments later two plainclothes police discharged their rifles at the figure that was dimly visible inside the car from which the purple-glowing bullet had been fired.

The screech of bullets striking his own machine startled Athtar. But he had taken the precaution of using a molecular reinforcing unit to harden the glass and the metal of the auto, so the bullets failed to penetrate.

What bothered him was that he only had a few bullets and in the dark he could not gauge the extent of the trap that had been set for him. So now, hastily, he put his car into drive, stepped on the gas and drove rapidly out of the parking lot.

A police car fell in behind him, flashing its red beacon. Though it or its weapons were no danger to Athtar, he feared a roadblock. He turned up several side streets and in only a few minutes of driving lured the police car onto a street near the lake on the far side of the Hark-

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dale Hotel, an approach he had thoroughly explored on foot.

Satisfied, he opened the car window on the driver's side, slowed, leaned out, looked back, took quick aim at the engine of the other machine and put a purple-glowing bullet through the crankcase. There was a shattering crash. The stricken motor almost tore itself apart, screaming metallically. The auto itself came to a bumpy halt.

ATHTAR hurriedly circled back to the Harkdale Hotel. The first queasy doubt had come to him that for a reason not yet clear his time was running out. Yet it still seemed true to him that all he need do was sneak into the hotel and discharge a single bullet at one, and only one, beating heart.

Minutes later, after squeezing through a kitchen window of the hotel, he found himself in a shadowy storeroom on a concrete floor. As he fumbled his way to a door, he had a fleeting mental image of his colleagues of the great Science Guild viewing him in such a lowly action. Of course, Athtar told himself scornfully, what they thought would not matter once he had control of the crystal. There would be dramatic changes after he got back to his own time—a few hundred Guild members were scheduled for extermination.

Cautiously he pulled open a door. As he started through the hallway beyond it he became aware of a faint sound behind him. He spun around and jerked up his gun.

Instant, unbearable pain in his arm forced the gun down and his finger away from the trigger. Almost at once the gun dropped from his nerveless hand, clattering to the floor. Even as he recognized that 35th-century technology was being used against him, he saw that a short, squat man was standing in the doorway of the storeroom he himself had just left.

Athtar's arm and hand were now inexorably forced by intolerable pain to reach into his inside breast pocket, take out the crystal and hold it out to the other man.

The second Athtar did not speak. He drew the door shut behind him, accepted the crystal and, bending down, picked up the gun from the floor. Then he edged past his prisoner, stepped through the door beyond and closed it behind him also.

At once, all the muscle pressures let go of the worst Athrar. Instantly desperate, he tried to jerk open the storeroom door. The door did not yield—it had an unnervingly solid feel to it. Athtar whirled toward the other door.

When he found it also presented that same solid resistance to his tug he finally recognized that he was trapped by molecular forces from his own era. There was nothing to do as the minutes lengthen-

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ed but sit down on the concrete floor and wait.

Sitting there, he knew a mixed reaction to his realization that the drama of the crystal would now play on without him. What seemed good about it was the distinct conviction that the game was more dangerous than he had let himself believe. He had recognized his assailant as the best of all possible Athtars.

Too, the Price woman was being cleverer than he had anticipated. Which meant that the automatic programing of the crystal to uncreate all but the best would force her to the most desperate actions. Or so it seemed to the worst Athtar.

Better not to be around when such extreme events were transpiring.

THE best of all possible Athtars walked through the hotel lobby to the conference room. The five Seth Mitchells were grouped outside the door, out of the line of vision of Edith, who was inside. Athtar gave the agreed-on signal and handed the worst Athtar's automatic pistol to one of the Seths. They were thorough. They searched him and then passed him on to Marge Aikens, who stood in the doorway.

To Marge, Athtar gave another agreed-on signal. Having thus established his identity as the friendly Athtar, whom Edith had recreated as a first step, he was now admitted into the room.

Athtar placed the crystal on the conference table in front of Edith. As her fingers automatically reached toward it, he placed a restraining hand on her wrist.

"I have a feeling," he admonished, "that this time when you pick it up—when the true orientation, *you*, picks it up—that will be the moment of crisis."

His voice and his words, seemed far away. She had—it seemed to her—considered those thoughts, and had those feelings, in approaching the decision to recreate *him*—the best Athtar. That, also, had been a crisis.

As she nevertheless hesitated out of respect for his knowledge and awareness, Edith noticed two impulses within herself. One was to go into a kind of exhaustion, in which she would act on the basis that she was too tired to think all that through again.

The second impulse was a clearer, sharper awareness, which had come to her suddenly at the library after she realized that the worst Athtar had tried his best to kill her.

Abruptly, then, the problems that had disturbed her earlier had faded. Whether it was better to be tough and be able to shoot or be soft and feminine, had no meaning. The real solution was infinite flexibility, backed by unvarying intention.

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One handled situations. That was all there was to it.

As she remembered that perfect thought the impulse toward exhaustion went away. She turned to Marge and said matter-of-factly, "Shall I tell him what we discussed while he was down in the storeroom?"

Marge nodded tensely.

Athtar listened with what appeared to be an expression of doubt, then said, "Having the crystal recreate one of its makers could be exactly what those makers are waiting for you to do."

"That's exactly what we thought," said Edith. And still she felt no fear. She explained, "Our thought is that, since the crystal is programed to find the best of each person, and the best Athtar turned out to be a reasonable person and not a criminal, then the makers of the crystal understand the difference. We may therefore assume that the society of the future is normal and will not harm us." She added: "That's why we recreated you—as a check."

"Good reasoning," said Athtar. "But I sense there's something wrong with it."

"But you have no specific thought?" she asked.

"No." He hesitated, then shrugged. "As a start," he said, "why not pick up the crystal—just pick it up—and see if my feeling about that gesture's being sufficient has any substance?" He explained, "If I'm wrong there we can dismiss my doubts."

"You don't want me to look at the design?"

The Seths had decided that her awareness of the design was the key to her control of the stone.

Athtar answered, "No, I sense that they're ready."

His words, the implication of ultra-perception that reached over, perhaps thousands of years, startled Edith and held her unmoving—but only momentarily.

She fought free.

"The truth is," said Edith aloud, completing her thought, "we all feel that we have no alternative left to us."

Without further delay she reached forward and picked up the crystal.

She gasped.

The man who walked out of the corner of the room, where he had materialized, was a giant. Seven, eight, nine feet—her mind kept reassessing the height, as she strove to adjust to the enormous reality of him.

The size, the blue harness clothing—like a Roman centurion guard in summer uniform—the bronze body, the large face with eyes as black as coal, unsmiling and firm; and in his bearing, conscious power unqualified by doubt or fear.

He said in a bass voice, in English, "I am Shalil, the best of all possible."

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VII

FOR a long moment Edith waited for him to complete the sentence. She presumed that the final word would be his name. At last, with a shock, she realized the sentence *was* finished. The crystal makers had sent the most qualified individual of their entire race to handle this situation.

In the doorway, Marge cringed away from the monster. She uttered a small cry. At the sound, two of the Seth Mitchells rushed into the room. They caught Marge, who seemed close to hysteria and fainting—and they also saw the apparition. The other three Seths crowded into the doorway.

As of one accord, obviously unwisely and therefore—as Edith realized later—under a volition not their own, they moved into the room, bringing Marge with them. The Seth who brought up the rear pulled the door shut behind him.

The best Athtar stirred and said in a sharp tone, "Miss Price—uncreate him! He does not mean well."

The giant grimaced. "You cannot uncreate me. I—and only I—now control the crystal. The term 'mean well' is relative. I mean well for my own time and my own group." He glanced over the five Seths and the two women, then settled on Athtar. "Which of you are the biologically original human beings?" he asked.

Edith clutched the crystal and glanced uncertainly at the Seths, silently appealing for suggestions. But they were staring at the giant and seemed oblivious to her.

Yet one of them asked abruptly, "Athtar, in what way doesn't he mean well?"

Athtar shook his head. "I don't know in details," he said unhappily. "But I have a feeling. They sent the crystal back here for their purpose. His question about original human beings points a significant direction. But don't answer it—or any other question he may ask."

It seemed a small, useless denial. The huge man strode to the door. The group of Seths let him through automatically. The giant opened the door and peered out into the hotel lobby. After a single, swift survey, he pushed the door shut again and faced about.

"I deduce," he said, "that the people of this era are the originals. They are the ones we want for our experiments."

Athtar said tautly to the Seths, "One of you has the worst Athtar's gun. Shoot him."

The instant the words were spoken the pistol floated into view, avoided the fingers of the two Seths who tried to seize it. It settled into Shalil's palm. He slipped the weapon into a pocket of his simple garment.

The best Athtar glanced at Edith. He said glumly, "I've done

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my best—" and faced the monster. "What happens to me?"

THE black eyes studied him.

"The crystal is communicating data to me," Shalil said. "You and the other Athtar are from an era where the people have already been biologically altered?"

Athtar glanced apologetically at Edith. "I see no additional danger in asking him a question since he already seems to have all the information we possess." Without waiting for a reply he addressed the huge man: "The decision made in the thirty-first century, nearly four hundred years before my time, was that small, heavy bodies had more survival potential than tall, thin ones. I see that in your era a much taller, bigger, more powerful man than any we have even imagined, is the norm. What is the rationale?"

"Different problems," answered Shalil. "In my era, which by your reckoning would correlate to the ninety-third century, man is a space creature." He broke off. "Since we have no interest in you at present, I propose to send you and the other Athtar back to your own time."

"Wait—" The best Athtar spoke urgently. "What do you intend to do with these people?" He waved toward Edith and the Seths.

Shalil grimaced. "What we actually want for our experiments are the best Seth Mitchell and the best Edith Price. The others are free to go. We set the crystal to find the best specimens."

"But why?"

"Something has gone wrong. We need to restudy human origins."

"Do you need these specific persons or will you merely have the crystal duplicate them in your own era?"

"Only one of each exists. If he and she are created in any other time they become uncreated here."

"What will you do? Dissect them?"

"In the end, perhaps. The experimenters will decide." Sharply. "Never mind that. The program is laid out and the subjects are urgently needed." His voice grew imperious. "Miss Price, give me the crystal. We are not needlessly cruel and I wish to send the Athtars home."

Athtar urged, "Miss Price, don't give it to him. His statement that he totally controls the crystal may not be true until the moment he has possession of it. These far-future beings must be persuaded to accept another, less arbitrary solution to their problem."

Edith had been standing, watching the fantastic giant, listening to the infinite threat that was developing out of his blunt words. Suddenly what had seemed an utterly desirable goal—to be the best—had become the most undesirable.

But she was not yet afraid. Her

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mind was clear. The tumbling thoughts and feelings of the past days, which had suddenly fallen into an exact order in her mind earlier that night, remained orderly.

Her own reaction was that Athtar was wrong and that she had, in fact, lost control of the crystal. It seemed obvious to her that the crystal's makers would have had some pre-emptive system by which they could regain its use at a key moment.

But she intended to test her theory.

She glanced at and into the crystal and said firmly, "Whoever can defeat this giant—be here now?"

MOMENTS after she had spoken, the crystal was snatched from her fingers by the same kind of unseen force as had taken the automatic pistol from one of the Seths earlier. She watched helplessly as it also floated over to the giant's palm. The huge man's black eyes gleamed triumphantly at her.

"All your allies are in this room. There is nobody else."

"In that case," said a man's voice quietly, "I imagine that, regardless of consequences, my moment has come."

The bachelor Seth Mitchell strode forward to confront the giant.

There was a long pause. Edith had time to assess this Seth and to savor the simple, strong humanity that he represented. She saw that he was well dressed in a dark gray suit, that his lean face was firm, his eyes calm and fearless. In some depths of her mind she was proud that at this moment such a Seth Mitchell existed. Yet, though she was still not afraid herself, she was aware of her hopes sinking.

The silence ended.

The great being from the future said, "I hope you realize that you are condemning the other Seths in forcing your identity on me in this manner. In this era the crystal has no alternative but to uncreate them."

Behind Edith, Marge cried out faintly.

Edith whirled. Marge seemed to be choking. Edith ran to her, put an arm around her waist.

"What's the matter?"

Marge continued to choke. Her words, when they finally came, were almost inaudible: "They're gone—the other Seths—"

Edith looked around. Where the four Seths had been standing near the door—there was no one. She had an impulse to run to the door and look out. Surely they had simply stepped outside for a moment.

Abruptly she realized. They had been uncreated.

She uttered a gasping sob—then caught herself as Seth Mitchell

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spoke in the same quiet tone as before.

"I said, regardless of consequences." He glanced back at the two women. "Since the Seths remain crystal patterns, they're no more in danger now than they would be if this creature were able to carry out all his threats. That probably even applies to the Seth of the gold Cadillac and the Edith who presumably was killed in New York." To Shalil he said, "I think you'd better send the Athtars into their own time."

There was an ever so slight pause; the giant's eyes changed slightly, as if he were thinking.

Then: "It's done," he said.

Edith glanced to where Athtar had been. With a conscious effort she retained her self-control.

Athtar had disappeared.

Shalil surveyed the best of all possible Seth Mitchells, said, "You really benefited from the crystal, didn't you?" He spoke in his softest bass. An intent, listening expression came into his face. "You own—one—three, four corporations."

"I stopped when I was worth ten million," said the best Seth. He turned to look apologetically at Edith. "I couldn't imagine having use for even that much money. But I had set it as a goal and reached it." Without waiting for her reaction he once more faced the gigantic enemy. "All the Seth Mitchells," he said, "are the results of a boy's dreams, based on what information he had. He undoubtedly had observed that there are tax experts, lawyers, doctors, tramps and policemen. And in a town like Harkdale he was aware of summer resort visitors—and on the level of a boy's daydreams there existed—until they were uncreated just now—a cowboy Seth Mitchell, an African hunter Seth, a sea captain, an airline pilot and probably even a few glamorous criminals—" He broke off. "I have a feeling you don't understand—you don't have any boys any more where you are, do you?"

VIII

THE giant's eyes shifted uncertainly.

He said, "We are crystal duplicates. Thus we shall presumably live forever—if we can solve the present tendency of the cells to be tired." He added reluctantly: "What's a boy?"

"Maybe there's your problem," said Seth Mitchell. "You've forgotten about children. Gene variation." The best Seth continued to gaze up at the great being. "I'm the creation," he said gently, "of a boy who, for a long time after Bill Bingham disappeared, was under exceptional adult pressure and criticism and as a result had many escape fantasies. Picture that boy's fantasy of total power—somebody who would

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handle mean adults who acted as if he were lying and who treated him nastily—some day he would show them all. How? The answer would not have been clear to the boy Seth who felt that resentment. But when the time came he knew he would know how—and of course he wouldn't be mean about it the way the adults had been. There would be a kind of nobility about his total power."

The two men, the best of all possible Seth Mitchells from the twentieth century, and the best of all possibles from the ninety-third century were standing within a few feet of each other.

"Perhaps," the best Seth addressed the giant softly, "you can tell better than I what the crystal would create out of such a command."

"Since nobility is involved," was the harsh reply, "I feel that I can safely test that boy's fantasy to the uttermost limit."

He spoke sharply, uncommandingly, in a strange language.

Edith had listened to the deadly interchange, thinking in a wondering dismay: *God really is dead! These future people have never even heard of Him . . .*

Her thought ended. For the giant's deep bass tones had suddenly ceased.

Something hit her deep inside her body. Around her the room dimmed.

As if from a vast distance she heard Seth Mitchell say apologetically: "Only thing I know, Miss Price, is to send you along with him. Seems you've got the solution in what you just thought, whatever that was. The crystal will make it real. Hope it works."

A moment after that she was falling into infinity.

THE body of Edith lay on a contour rest-space in one corner of the crystal administrative center. Periodically a giant walked over to her and routinely checked the instruments that watched over her and monitored the invisible force lines that held her.

A slow night went by. A new day finally dawned. The sunlight that suffused the translucent walls also revealed half a dozen giants, including Shalil, gathered around the slowly breathing—but otherwise unmoving—body of the young woman from the twentieth century.

To wake or not to wake her?

They discussed the problem in low, rumbling voices. Since they were all scientists, capable of appreciating the most subtle nuances of logic, what bothered them was that the small female presented a paradox.

Outward appearance said she was helpless. Shalil had been able to put Edith into a coma. At the instant of the best Seth's command to the crystal and she had arrived in

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that degraded condition in the ninety-third century.

Or rather, she had been uncreated in her own time and had been recreated by the crystal in Shalil's time, already unconscious. She herself had not had any control over her own destiny.

What disturbed her captors was that an undefinable power radiated from her—and had ever since her recreation. The power was not merely ordinary. It was total.

Total power? Absolute and unqualified? How could that be?

Once more they gave attention on both hearing and telepathic levels, as Shalil repeated his account of what had transpired while he had been in the twentieth century. The story, already familiar, reiterated the same peak moments: the ordinariness, the unthreatening aspect, of all the people of the past whom Shalil had confronted.

Again they were told the climax—when the best Seth had assumed that the crystal would evolve an unusual energy configuration out of a boy's fantasies of power. Clearly—at least, it was clear to the huge men—the crystal's response to Seth's command established that it had been oriented to the best Seth. And that its energies had been mobilized for later expression, when the original Seth Mitchell had been a boy. From that energy response by the crystal alone the giants reasoned unhappily: "There is more potential in these crystals than we have hitherto believed."

And how could *that* be?

But there was even worse.

WHILE giving his command to Edith the best of possible Seth Mitchells had implied that he had received a feedback message from her, presumably by way of the crystal, indicating that she would all by herself now be able to defeat the entire science of the ninety-third century.

Once Shalil took control of the crystal, such a feedback of information—whether true or false—should not have occurred. And Seth's command, by any known scientific analysis, was impossible.

True, they did not know all there was to know about the crystals. Several unexplained areas were still being researched. But it had long been argued that nothing major remained to be discovered.

The present implication was that original, unmanipulated human beings might have special qualities that had been lost to their biologically manipulated descendants.

A giant grunted, "I think we should kill her."

A second huge man growled an

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objection. He argued. "If the attempt to destroy her should bring a reaction from the absolute power that radiates from her, that reaction would be uncontrollable. Much better to deduce on the basis of Shalil's report the low-level ways in which her mind functions, awaken her and inexorably force responses from her."

Everybody thought that was a good idea.

"And if something goes wrong," one giant rumbled, "we can always render her unconscious again through instantaneous uncreation and recreation by the crystal."

Shalil reminded gruffly, "What about that odd decision she had reached in her attempt to be the best of all possible Ediths, to handle situations with infinite flexibility?"

Contempt greeted the remark. "With *her* lifetime conditioning," one huge scientist said, "she couldn't possibly deal with each situation according to its merits. She cannot even know what the real issues of a situation are."

The discussion ended on a decision that when Edith was awakened she should seem to herself to be completely free . . .

SHE was lying on grass. It touched her fingers and her face. The fresh smell of it was in her nostrils.

Edith opened her eyes and simultaneously raised her head.

Wilderness. A primeval forest. A small brown animal with a bushy tail scurried into the brush, as she climbed hastily to her feet, remembering.

She saw the giant, Shalil, in the act of picking himself up fifteen feet to her left. He seemed slow about it, as if he were groggy.

The day was misty. The sun still stood high in the sky. To her right, partly visible through foilage, was a great, gray hill of soil. To her left the land fell away and the mist was thicker. After a hundred yards it was an almost impenetrable fog.

Almost, but not quite, impenetrable. Vaguely visible through it was a building.

Edith faced the giant squarely and asked, "Where are we?"

Shalil gazed at her warily. It was hard for him to realize that she did not intuitively know. He found it almost unacceptable that alongside her infinite power was such nadir thinking.

Yet, as she continued to stand there, facing him, he sensed her concern. And so, reluctantly, he decided that the first conclusions reached by his colleagues and himself continued to apply. They had perceived her to be motivated by involuntary attitudes and forgotten memories, each psychically as solid as a bar of steel. All her life she had followed rules, gone along with group-think behavior.

School and college—these were the early norms, adhered to while

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she was still under the control of her parents. Basically those norms had remained unquestioned.

Shalil noted in her mind an awareness that millions of people had somehow failed to achieve higher education. That was astonishing to him; yet somehow, these multitudes had been steered away from knowledge by a variety of accidental circumstances.

So in those areas of personal development Edith had gone farther, better, straighter than a great many. Yet in college, first time away from her family, she had swiftly been caught up in a nonconformist group movement. Whatever the motives of the other persons involved, Edith's had consisted solely of an intense inner need to belong to the group.

So, for her, it had been the beginning of aberration, which her behavior ever afterward reflected. Thus, Shalil observed, like a person struggling against invisible force lines, she had fought to return to an inner norm. More study, different jobs, different places to live, association with different men—the confusion was immense, and it was difficult for Shalil to determine which of her numerous actions represented striving toward a real goal.

Adding to the jumble: all her actions had been modified by a very large, though finite, number of small, endlessly repeated actions—eating habits, dressing habits, working, sleeping, walking, reacting, communicating, thinking stereotypes.

WHAT bothered Shalil was that he could not find a single point of entry into her mind that would not instantly trigger one of the stereotypes. The others had assumed that her conscious mind would present some opening; they had taken it for granted that he would locate it. His instructions were to uncreate her into unconsciousness if he failed to make such an entry, whereupon there would be another consultation.

The possibility of such a quick failure disturbed Shalil. Temporizing, he said aloud, "This is the Garden of the Crystals in my century. Here, in the most virgin wilderness left on our planet, the crystals lie buried in the soil, tended by guardian scientists."

Having spoken, having had that tiny bit of extra time to consider, he decided that the problem she presented might yield to a steady pressure of verbal maneuvering that would motivate her to express one after the other the endless stereotypes that had been detected in her—while he waited alertly for one he could shatter or through which the crystal—on his command—would divest her of the power with which it had, through some unknown factor, invested her.

Her primary concern, he saw,

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was that she would never get back to her own era. Since he knew she could return at once simply by thinking the correct positive thought, his problem was to keep her worried, negative, unaware, deceived, misled.

Shalil became aware that his anxiety about how to proceed was causing a hasty telepathic consultation among his colleagues. Moments later the suggestion was made: *Divert her by letting her win some minor victories and believe that they are gifts from you . . .*

The idea seemed good and Shalil carried it out as if it were a directive.

IX

AT THE Harkdale hotel another day dawned. Marge Aikens came downstairs, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. She walked to the conference room, looked in. The lights had been turned off, the drapes were still drawn and the dim emptiness of the room weighted her spirits.

She turned away and became aware of a man beside her. She faced him with a start.

The hotel day clerk, Derek Slade, said courteously, "Madam—"

He continued to speak and after a while his meaning penetrated her dulled mind. He thought he had recognized her as the young woman who had late the previous afternoon gone into the conference room with the five Seth Mitchells. Where—Derek wanted to know—were the four married Seths? The wives had been phoning all night, according to a note on his desk from the night clerk. And a police officer was on the way over because three Mrs. Mitchells had finally called the authorities.

Marge had an impulse to deny that she was the woman he thought he had seen. But his failure to mention the bachelor Seth captured her attention and she asked about him.

Derek shook his head. "Not in his room. Went out early, I'm told."

Marge stood in the doorway, considering what might have happened to the best Seth. Why would he have gone out when he had said the previous that he would have breakfast with her? Then she became aware that Derek Slade's gaze had gone past her shoulder and was seeking the darkened interior of the room behind her.

His jaw grew lax, his eyes widened.

In the room a man's baritone voice uttered an exclamation.

Marge turned.

The four Seths who had been uncreated last night were standing near the door. Their backs were to her.

She realized that it was one of the Seths who had exclaimed and

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that what he had said was, "Hey, who turned out the lights?"

Marge had an immediate and totally perceptive awareness of the implications, of those words. Her mind leaped back to Billy Bingham's not having had any transition impression at all of time having passed between his uncreation and recreation.

This was the same.

She reached into the room and pressed the light switch beside the door. As she did so a fifth Seth walked forward from one corner of the room, where he had suddenly appeared. He seemed bewildered. From his clothing Marge tentatively identified him as the Seth of the gold Cadillac, somehow recreated without a bullet in his brain or a drop of lake water on his immaculate suit.

But at the moment she had only a fleeting thought for him, for a sixth Seth was suddenly standing on the far side of the conference table. The way he held himself, his quick alertness as he looked around the room, saw the other Seths—and then flicked his gaze to her with relieved recognition . . .

Seeing him, and receiving so many familiar signals that identified Detective Seth Mitchell for her Marge became emotionally unglued. Without any of her usual discretion, she let out a scream.

"Seth—my darling—"

Exactly how she got to him and he to her could undoubtedly be reasoned out from the fact that they met at the halfway point around the big table—and only desisted from their embrace when Marge grew aware that Edith Price was standing a few feet away, glancing timidly around her.

Closely behind Edith appeared another Seth. He wore work clothes and Marge surmised that he therefore must be the farmer.

Marge scarcely more than glanced at him. As she released herself from Detective Seth's embrace she saw that Edith wore a different dress and had her hair done differently—this was the Edith Price who had been murdered in New York by the worst Athtar.

Of the Athtars there was no sign.

And though the minutes fled by—and finally the bachelor Seth walked into the doorway—Edith Price, the crystal orientation, did not reappear.

The best Seth explained that he had gone for a walk and, thinking over all that had happened, had decided that things would work out.

He finished hopefully, "And here you all are. Each of you is living proof that Edith has found out what she can do. Or—"he paused—"someone has, and is willing."

"But what *can* she do?" a Seth asked, bewildered.

The best Seth smiled his friend-

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ly smile. "I'm rather fond of that young lady. In a way she's a total reflection of our age, yet she thought her way to some kind of best." He broke off, glanced from one to another of the numerous duplicate faces, and said softly, "You want to know what she can do? I didn't dare speak of it at the time, but, now, well—if God is dead, what can replace Him?"

"Then you are—" Marge put her hand over her mouth, exclaimed through it, "Oh, my lord—Edith!"

The best Seth said slowly, "I wonder what the crystal and Edith are doing with that concept."

SHALIL was in trouble. The giant had continued to wait for the purely personal, restrictive thought that, he and his colleagues believed, would presently end any control Edith had of the crystal's future.

But the moments had gone by and she had kept on uttering idealistic concepts that were binding on him and his kind in relation to the people of the past. All the Seths and the Ediths were recreated. She proposed a cooperative solution for the severe threat to the giant human beings of his century—between the giants on the one hand and the Ediths and Seths on the other. In an outburst of imagination she visualized a time corridor between her own century and his. Thriftily she retained control of that corridor for her own group.

It was as she established that enormous connection, and control, that Shalil—desperate—had her uncreated. He recreated her, unconscious, on the contour restplace. The huge scientists gathered around her comatose body and gloomily evaluated the extent of their defeat.

One said, "But let's face it. We can live with what's happened."

The problem was that they had made no headway. Edith still radiated total power; somehow, she continued to evoke from the crystal an energy output that no one had ever thought possible.

Shalil had a tremendous insight. "Perhaps that's what we need to examine—our own limitations. Perhaps the real problem is that in our scientific zeal we have rejected the enigma."

After he had spoken, there was a dead silence. He saw that they were shaken. The enigma was the forbidden—because unscientific—area of thought: *The enigma that is the universe. Why does it exist? Where did it come from?*

The thrall of shocked silence ended as a giant gave a harsh, determined laugh.

"I don't know anything about the enigma and do not plan to," he said, "but as a scientist I do know my duty—*our* duty. We must bring this small female to conscious-

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ness, inform her of the unqualified extent of her power and see what she does with it."

"B-but she may kill us all," protested another. He added, almost plaintively, "I've never been killed."

"It will be an interesting experience for you," replied the first man. "Quite different from uncreation."

Shalil interjected matter-of-factly, "Edith is not a killer." He broke off, shrewdly, "I think this is an excellent plan. I see it as being totally in our favor."

They perceived what he meant, and accordingly sanctioned the awakening.

EDITH was brought awake. After she had calmed herself—after she had been told about her absolute ability she had an automatic response, exactly as the giants had anticipated. For prolonged seconds a wild hope suffused her entire being. She wanted more urgently to undo the errors of judgment which had led her down the empty road of numerous boy friends, none of whom took responsibility for her and her capacity to bear children. All her years of frustration since college found their way first to her eyes in the form of quick tears, and then, when she could speak, to her words.

"Aside from what I've just told you—" she spoke the qualifying phrase, which retained for her control of access to the twentieth century without even noticing it—"*all* I really want is to be happily married."

The giants perceived that the person she had in mind for a husband was the bachelor Seth Mitchell.

They accordingly commanded the crystal that the wish she had expressed be carried out forthwith in its exact and limited meaning. And then, safe and relieved, they stood marveling at the difficult concept of marriage.

In an era where everybody lived forever by a process of crystal duplication they would never, left to themselves, have been able to ask the right question to produce such an answer.

"It is barely possible," Shalil cautiously summed up, "that the interaction between the unmanipulated human beings of the twentieth century and the manipulated of the ninety-third will actually bring about a lessening of the rigidities of both groups."

His stern, black gaze dared a denial. After a long moment, he was surprised to realize that no one was offended.

Indeed, a colleague murmured reflectively, "If that should happen we may even find out what the crystal is."

But, of course, that was impossible.

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The crystal was a space phenomenon. The energy flows in it, around it and out of it involved individual events, things, persons. But this was a subordinate function—like the motor center in a human brain that moves a muscle in the tip of the little finger.

The muscle should be movable. It would be unfortunate if it were not. Yet if that muscle were permanently incapacitated the fact would go unnoticed by the brain on the conscious level.

On the flow level of existence the patterned *interactions* in and around and out of the crystal exceeded 10 to the 27000th power times the number of atoms in the universe—enough interactions for all the life configurations of all the people who ever lived; perhaps enough even for all those who ever would live on Earth.

But for the crystal such effects were minor. As a governor of certain time-and-life flows it had suspended those flows for twenty-five years in the Harkdale museum. The suspension did not matter—it meant almost nothing. As a shape of space, its existence was continuous. As space, it occupied a location and was related. Though it had no flows during the quarter century, made no recording and had no memory and no doing, it nevertheless knew, it was, it had and it could.

In finding it and tens of thousands of crystals like it, human beings of the eighth and ninth millennia made use of the interactions and flows; never of the space ability. They discovered the principal "laws"—the how and the what—by which the crystals operated and were determined to find out eventually the rules that would "explain" certain unknowns in the wave behavior in and around and out of the crystals.

Some day all the interactions of all life and all time would be evenly divided among the crystals. It would then become its true form; one crystal shape, one space. It would then be complete, its . . . intention . . . achieved.

There was no hurry.

And so it waited. And, waiting, fulfilled other goals than its own, minor, unimportant goals involving flows and interactions; reflecting the illusions of motion: events, things, persons . . . involving nothing, really.

IN CONSEQUENCE, in Harkdale today stands a one-story building of unusual design. The building occupies the exact spot where Billy Bingham once disappeared on the shore overlooking Lake Naragang. It is a solidly built structure and has a certain beauty.

Its method of construction is shrouded in mystery. Natives grow vague when asked about it.

On a gold plaque beside the ornate front door are the words:

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SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW

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Not every man has a chance to look down the ladder of his success—and see the wrongs!

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SECOND RUN AT THE DATA

JOHN RANKINE

PAUL PICTON, top hand in Chester City Security, saw the nimbus of amber light dead ahead on his flight lane and checked his time disk. Two minutes would take him to the entry port. Five minutes to curfew. A neat use of available time.

He penciled a final note on the brief he had worked over during the trip and shoved it away in a monogramed document case.

Submitted to the city fathers it should jerk the last waverers to a militant policy of clearance for the intercity areas. He would then have agreement from all five of the Wirral cities. That would strengthen his hand when Jervis retired in the fall. There would be nobody else with a record of pan city administration. Regional Director of Security was but a step away.

That the peninsula would be free over its length and breadth for honest men to walk to and fro—always supposing there were any about—would be a welcome by-product of his personal success.

His attention was distracted from this wholesome program as the auto shuttle asked for clearance. The record clerk who had dictated its vocabulary bank had a clear, bell-like soprano which suddenly gave the shuttle a new dimension even on the formal exchange.

"Two-nine-six stroke A.C. Request entry lane."

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"You have it. Reduce speed. Lane six, check booth F. You are welcome."

"Lane six, check booth F. Thank you."

Picton, in an unusually reflective mood, reckoned that mechanical courtesy swapping was a waste of power. Repeated over a decade it must represent a significant money loss. He might look into that. Show zeal as a public economist.

He crossed the edge of the last of the reforestation zones fifty meters below, planted out in the last century as a counterweight to the thinning atmosphere in the intercity areas. From here on, industrial wasteland fled under him. Concrete rubble. Remains of old surface road systems. A maze of flyovers, underpasses and tumbled cloverleaf intersections. High time somebody cleared it up. There was shelter there, too near the city, for every kind of kook.

A bright splash of silver gray between two raised roadways had him craning around as his shuttle passed over. There was no doubt about it. An aircar had gone down there. Social worker, maybe, or medical unit. They were stupid to bother. The people who lived out there did so from choice. If they accepted the system and put in a day's work they could be comfortable inside.

Something about the angle of the car, however, triggered another line of thought. Only a fool would have selected that landing point. More likely a forced landing. The plexiglas dome was all awry at that.

Well, it would cost the pilot something to get a maintenance crew to turn out at this time of day, with the possibility of its being sniped at as dusk came on. More than likely he would settle for sweating it out until morning. He might lose some of his gear but the unscheduled citizens living outside rarely went in for personal violence in spite of reports. Just a hard night as a penalty for not having enough oil in his can.

PICTON was looking away when a flash of something green being waved registered on his peripheral vision. The wrecked car was out of sight—but he carried off an eidetic image which obligingly reformed on the polished curve of the shuttle's console. The waver was female, nubile, red-headed, wearing a veridian tabard, torn dramatically from the left shoulder to show a pale tumescence of white skin. She was arched back against the curvature of the wreck, one arm doing the signaling with a scarf or some such.

His first reaction was irritation. He had been maneuvered into a corner where he had to ignore an appeal for help. Later, his shuttle might be identified. It would look bad on the record.

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Well, he would take that chance. Going down there now would leave him no time to get in before curfew. That would mean a night at the Gatehouse. Bad for his image.

The shuttle was picking up speed again, ready for a clear run down Lane Six, when Picton caught sight of himself on the same piece of polished bulkhead.

Most times the reflection gave him uncomplicated pleasure—a long smooth egg head with dark brown hair slicked back; large, intelligent eyes; thin, well-contoured mouth. Currently an unsmoothed relic of the race's sentimental past had seen fit to shove a hairy finger out of the unconscious dungheap and write RAT, in Palace Script, upper case, across his bland forehead.

He fought it for thirty seconds and the shuttle was adjusting to the carrier beam which would see it home to its pad when he finally moved, a defeated logician. Slipping into the pilot seat, he broke the auto chain and took the console on manual.

The distant traffic controller, startled out of courtesy, said, "Two-nine-six stroke A. C. Stay in lane."

Picton crossed three empty outgoing lanes in an illegal U-turn and headed back. At the same time he selected a security channel and alerted his own office.

"Controller Picton. I am investigating a grounded shuttle two kilometers out on the Wirral Trunk. Book me in at the Gatehouse in case I need a room."

An android counter clerk gave a timed receipt for the record and Picton switched off.

It was some years since he had flown a shuttle and he found he was enjoying it. He dropped ten meters below the lowest flight lane and watched the broken ground through the observation panel at his feet.

Close down, the terrain was less easy to identify. All the dilapidated areas looked alike. Could be he would not find the wreck again and his selfless efforts would be all loss.

But Picton had not crawled to the heights of his profession for nothing. He bent his brain to it and came up with a zig-zag plan of search over the half kilometer where the wreck must lie.

Two freight cars passed overhead in a howl of effort to reach port before curfew. Then, like the ploughman, he had the dusk to himself.

He came on the wreck unexpectedly and so close that all the detail was clear. He was approaching it from the far side and the figure was hidden except for the arm still waving its green scarf.

Something was wrong about that. What was she waving at? There was nothing about except his own car and any fool could see that he was landing.

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He dropped down neatly on the skids and shoved back the hatch. Then he was outside, drawing deep breaths and moving slowly like the manuals said to counteract the oxygen-thin air.

Rounding the blunt bows of the grounded craft, he panted out: "Stop that. Come with me. I'll take you to the Gatehouse."

Then he stopped. His foundling was an android, a collector's piece with a torso modeled from a classical original, but with large, balancing feet of aluminum.

Even in rarefied air Picton's brain was no slouch in handling information. It hit its ceiling of a thousand million units a second and punched out a definitive warning: *Out Paul, your gallantry has been abused . . .*

Other signals crowded his sensors. A whir came from his own shuttle. As he whipped around it began to lift. By the time he had taken two imprudently fast steps it was up ten meters.

Panting hard, his heart beginning to race, he stood still and watched it go.

PICTON was all of one minute with open mouth and his mind on a loop saying that they couldn't do that to him. Then he closed mind and mouth and looked around the darkening set.

At ground level there was not much to see. The sky glow thrown up by the city was diffuse and distant. Working his way over the rubble in the dark it would take him hours to cover a kilometer.

He moved slowly to the wrecked car and said irritably, "You can stop that. No other sucker is likely to go by."

The android stopped and turned its head to the voice. Momentarily, he believed he had been wrong. Wide-open blue eyes in a regular oval face focused intelligently on his own. She was certainly a high-grade job. One of those proscribed in the cities more than a century back for being too near the human pattern and apt to lead the frail human psyche into perversion.

Having registered that the arrival was male, tall and knocking forty, this one went off in a sultry drawl like a saloon hostess. "Welcome, handsome stranger. Follow me and I'll show you where the action is."

Picton ignored the invitation and climbed into the shell of the wreck. What he saw was no help. All usable gear had long been stripped out. The effort of climbing aboard had made him sweat as if he had been hauling himself around on an Andean peak. One way or another he had to get himself to the atmosphere-controlled Gatehouse.

But transport was essential.

The android had walked around to the hatch and was peering in like a disembodied head. She was the

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only mechanized artifact on the set. Maybe he could have her tow him along. Or carry him, even?

He said sharply. "Put your hands on your hips and turn around. Stand still."

Careful to preserve his balance, Picton, light-headed now as if in a dream sequence, angled himself onto her shoulders.

When he was set, he said, "Okay. Walk round the shuttle."

Obliging, if nothing else, and seemingly without any speech response for this contingency, she picked her way, sure-footed in the rubble, on a complete circuit. The ride was not uncomfortable. Picton reckoned he could hold the seat for as long as it would take. There was even an agreeable scent of verbena wafting up from long-acting perfume ducts behind her plastic ears.

They left the grove at a steady pace with trooper Picton tall in the saddle and peering forward into the gathering dusk. Without having to make physical effort and discovering the knack of deep regular breathing, Picton grew adjusted enough to his environment to begin to work out the angles.

His patient zombie was a valuable piece of equipment. Whoever had fixed the decoy would want it back. To take her away had proved too easy to be allowed.

He had hardly formulated this estimate of the situation when he became aware that he and the android were moving out of line. Underfoot he saw smooth ashlar, unusually free from rubble and his pearl white mare, reacting to the good road, had stepped up her rhythm.

She rounded a corner into a gully, the floor sloping down in a broad vamp.

He said, "Hold it there. Wait—" and struggled to get free. But she had his legs in a viselike grip and took no notice.

Darkness gathered around his head. He felt the sway of a sharp left turn and put his hands out to fend off a wall but found only open space. Another sharp turn and there was enough light for him to see a roof overhead. He could even touch it and run his hands along it for something to grip. But it was glass smooth.

Then she was walking directly toward a ridged, silver gray barrier with diffused light behind it and his probing hands were pushing away multiple strands of thick plastic rope. There was almost half a meter of it—enough to engulf him in a curious yellow limbo before he found himself in an open space, brilliantly lit.

A man's voice said, "What's this, then? The Old Man of the Sea?"

HIS first bonus was a standard atmosphere and Paul Picton took long quivering breaths of it. His head cleared. He was in a large

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community room and he reckoned he had made a poor entrance for a V. I. P.

Thirty or more people were deployed about the set, a mixed age group. The youngest were playing some kind of building game with large, numbered cubes, watched by a dark girl with a thick ringlet like a blue-black, lustrous rope forward of the left shoulder.

A small group was watching the early evening newscast. Two women of indeterminate age with head bands and buck teeth were playing three-dimensional chess. Far left, a round-faced young man astride an artist's donkey was knocking off a canvas from a life model and the girl tapping her foot on the plinth, except for the detail of aluminum feet, could have been twin sister to Picton's mount.

The scene was an updated version of a Dyak long house in full social spate and the overwhelming impression was of relaxed enjoyment.

Every eye had tracked him in. The bearded father figure who had spoken first went into transmission again.

"Put the Controller down, Amanda. You have done very well."

So they knew who Paul Picton was. It had all been arranged. One way or another, they would have brought him to this place. He had simply made it easy for them. Well, they would not be so complacent when his clearance drive got under way. He smoothed down his metal cloth tunic and recaptured what cool he could.

"What do you hope to gain by this?"

"Gain? There is nothing to gain. Except perhaps for yourself. We wanted to have a look at you. The fact that you responded to Amanda's signal is encouraging. For a start, it suggests that you are not pig iron all through or you would have ignored her."

"And if I had done so?"

"You are a regular commuter through here at this time. Some other way would have been found."

Feet on a steady floor, good air to breathe, Picton was feeling more himself. Although, overall, the situation was bizarre, these were rational people. Diplomatic usage could be followed.

Picton said, and even managed a false smile, "Guide me to the Gatehouse and I will overlook the action so far. Though I can't speak for the shuttle company. They may have their own views about the loss of their property. But I'm willing to forget this if we go now."

"Not so fast. Put our actions down to our concern for your good. Let me introduce myself. I am Michael Gerrard."

Picton ignored the hand that was being held out. "My well-being will be best served by your letting me

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complete my journey. Yours also is now bound up with it. At daybreak there will be a search."

"Not so. You still do not appreciate the position you are in. Alex, let him hear the last signal from his shuttle."

A plump, middle-aged man with a receding hair line and a fixed grin pulled a palm-sized recorder from the pocket of his coveralls and thumbed down a switch. Picton heard his own voice say: "I have picked up the occupant of the stranded shuttle. Cancel my reservation at the Gatehouse. I am leaving the region and will be away for some days. Immediate destination Blundell City."

Gerrard said, "That gives us some time. Time for much vision and revision. Roy, Carlos, take the Controller into the theater. Hook him up to the screen.

Belatedly Picton tried to run for the rope wall. Hands grabbed him. He was carried backward, kicking, his feet off the floor, across the width of the room and through an open arch into semi-darkness. He felt a sharp stab high in his left shoulder and, although his mind went crystal clear, the steam went out of him.

Unable to move, he saw and felt them strap him to a highbacked chair with a head stall. He felt a cold circlet of light alloy drop around his forehead, and hands he could not see made adjustments that set uncountable small pressure points all over his skull.

At his back came the sound of feet as an audience filed in and settled down to watch. Before him an oval screen glowed a pale translucent green like an immense cathode eye.

Gerrard's voice, to Picton's left and to the rear, had taken on a soft, hypnotic tone that seemed to infiltrate into the very fabric of his head. "Relax Controller. Just relax. I want to take you back to your first memories. You are a small boy. You remember what it was like to be a very small boy."

PICTON tried to resist. It was an invasion of privacy. The screen deepened to cherry red. He said, "No—" over and over and it appeared on the screen as a running border. No. No. No. No.

But he could feel the relaxing tide washing in. His resistance crumbled like a sand castle and disappeared. The line of negatives on the screen shrank small into a sequence of black dots. The screen itself became a creamy mist that cleared suddenly to a black and white picture of brilliant definition. He was looking at a short run of clinically bare wall with an open gap into a white tiled corridor.

It was something he could have sworn had been lost in the mental scree. Sifted out. But the scene was true enough. He must have been five or six years old at that time. He was looking from his trundle

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bed to the open end of his cubicle in the Initial Teaching Establishment, where he had gone from the Nursery Unit in Eastham City.

Emotion came fully articulated with the picture. He was crying silently, so that no sound could be picked up on the monitor, tears running in a steady stream down his face. Stage one in the conditioning of a public servant had begun. He was on his own, without parent or friend or any personal artifact to call his own. Just an embryo personality in a sterile casket.

He was crying because some dissembler had whipped his woolly dog on a hygiene kick. It was a small issue, but an illustration that pain is only real if you feel it and he was feeling it.

The screen blanked, glowed ruminatively for a count of five and unfolded again on a new pitch.

Focus was sharper. He was standing in front of a console and he was terrified. Hands behind his back, he had the fingers in a cat's cradle twist in a bid to control a muscular tremor which was rippling about on his upper arms and behind his knees.

Over the broad desk top, the principal of the I. T. E., a smooth-faced pedagogue with cold blue eyes, had his fingertips in a judicious docking ploy and was staring over them like a stone image. They hid his mouth so that his voice sounded like a ventriloquist's.

"Your explanation is not satisfactory, Picton. Wrong responses over two hundred items were exactly the same as Kopec's. There is no doubt you were copying his work. It is not intelligent to deny it. You disappoint me, Picton."

Picton, reliving the scene at full emotional strength, writhed in the hot seat. Simple fear, basic indignation at the injustice of it, shame at the ongoing action, which he remembered now in detail, all combined to bead his forehead with sweat.

He heard the boy, that familiar stranger, say haltingly, "It was Kopec. Kopec asked me for the answers and I told him what I had. It wasn't me, Mr. Onon, it was Kopec."

He saw Smiler Kopec, his great friend, as an inset at the top right on the screen. His only prop and stay in that draughty caravanserai. Betrayed. For what?

"Then it was your duty to say so. Which you have now done. Very good, Picton. There is hope for you. You were wrong, however, to answer his questions. For that you must be punished. You must see that your action would falsify the records."

What was the punishment? Nothing he could remember. Only the look in Kopec's eye when he passed him in the corridor and the empty place next to his own in the refectory.

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That was not shown on the screen. Gerrard edited it out and passed on, skipping a decade and putting the finger on the subject in his freshman year at the Barnston Polytech—that illustrious Alma Mater for all there was of genius in the North West Province.

He was in a small common room, close-packed with male and female intelligentsia sitting on the floor, perched on chair backs, shoulder-to-shoulder around the walls. One and all listening like beavers to a spectacular redhead in a tight, lime-green sweater.

She had the freedom of a small clearing in the middle of the press. As she turned animatedly this way and that to make contact with all the group her hair swung elastically with subtle shifts of color. Neat, capable hands made precise gestures to emphasize a point. She was a honey. Rita Danvers, elected head of the student body for the semester. Currently drumming support for a demo against the clampdown on a popular course in social history.

He was in this private meeting, though a freshman, on her personal invitation. He had dated her twice and the signs were all affirmative.

Seated in the front row, Picton was well placed to admire her long athletic legs and get the message strength nine. Against his chest, in his breast pocket, he could feel the vibration of the miniature recorder which was taking a transcript.

There was some conflict in his mind. What she was saying had the ring of truth. But he told himself it was emotional truth, not intellectual truth. Logic and reason should dictate the program. The authorities, with all the data to work on, must have the better case.

At the end, amid applause, she went into a full knee bend beside him and put an impulsive hand on his shoulder. Eyes shining. A stimulated demagogue. He was afraid that the electric warmth of her touch might send up a crackle of static.

But he had it all buttoned up. Chapter and verse for the action. Names named. Tasks allocated. It was a full hour before he could get away to his own room—then he was sitting at his study carrel calling through to the senior administrator on a private link and plugging in the small capsule that told all.

He watched them take her away. Four riot cars dropped out of a clear sky into the main square. Security men turned out at a run, carbines held chest high. Nineteen militants were taken. She came out between two guards, head back, hair catching the sun in a bright aureole.

That was the last he saw of her, or heard. One discreet inquiry he had made but the writing on the wall was plain to read.

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Not your business, Picton. Do your job. Don't ask questions. You will be looked after . . .

He was looked after. Without being particularly popular or specially gifted for the chore he had fetched up in the top student slot as president.

Without beating his brain to a froth he clocked the best grades in his year. Security, with a private line to the back of every examining computer was the horseshoe in his glove.

That was the beginning. There was much more, a rodent's progress through the social maze, becoming ever more adept at nosing out the right information at the right time. Finally taking a hand in his own rise and progress to the top echelon of the security machine itself.

Picton could sense that the crowd at his back was hostile. Relaxing drugs still pussy-footing around the synapses prevented any strong reaction. But he was suddenly anxious that they should see his point of view. There was another side to the record. Authority was important. The end justified the means. Stability and order were the ultimate good. Freedom was only possible under strong guarantee. He was, all in all, a pillar of the social fabric.

He only realized that he had been talking aloud when an answer came from the group.

A girl's voice said, "The ancient lie. Ends and means are complementary. No good end ever came from treachery and broken faith. You are a monster."

Gerrard said, "Don't forget, he was conditioned to it over a long period. A man's past and present do not necessarily dictate the pattern of his future. If they did, this examination would not be worth conducting."

PAUL PICTON was fighting for breath. His free-wheeling mind had sold him the illusion that a bearded tormentor was building a mound of lead granules, handful by handful, on his chest. He opened his eyes.

There was nothing much to see. It was cold. He was lying without cover on a ridged stone floor open to the sky. A dawn wind sliding uneasily through the asphalt jungle poked small cold fingers down his tunic collar and up the legs of his pants.

He was stopped dead in his catalogue of discomfort by the sky. He might never have seen it before. In some sense that was true. What was to be seen through the plexiglas baffles over city streets or from the seat of a hurrying shuttle was nothing like the naked contact.

Distance to dwarf him to a sand grain. A star map that put the European Federation of Cities into perspective as a transient fiction. Color that ranged from the

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most intense black to a startling heliotrope in an irregular, widening band over the horizon.

Picton rolled over and heaved himself slowly to hands and knees, a panting dog ready to bay the moon. He could not take his eyes off the sky and could not believe that it had been there all the time. For his money it could have been created freshly to confuse him.

He was well placed to see it. All around him the ground fell away. He was on the high point of a humpback flyover. The city was plain to see, not half a kilometer distant. His time disk told him it was 0600. Only thirty minutes and he could go straight in.

There was a central island with the stump of a rusty bollard. He crawled to it and pulled himself to his feet, shivering as if with an ague. His mind knew one overriding imperative—to get inside and make for his pad.

Light strengthened all the time, bringing up the way ahead as a composition in shades of gray. He forced himself to move at a slow, deliberate walk, mouth hanging wide open to pack in more air.

He paused a hundred meters from the city gate, self-hypnotized by the rhythm of his unaccustomed exercise. The sky beyond the city had flushed rose madder and had stopped him in his tracks.

For a count of ten he looked at it stupidly. The long shadow of the city wall came out to within a meter of his feet. Two more paces and he would be engulfed by it.

Short on oxygen intake, his mind gagged and slipped off load, leaving him without benefit of guidance.

Somewhere in the unconscious brain tub where every man is his own stranger, a life prisoner snapped its corroded chains and pole-vaulted into the vacant slot from which prudent government had stepped down.

Picton turned his back on the city and looked the way he had come. The wasteland was bathed in a red flood as though a cosmic hand had brought up a dimmer. With the force of revelation, he knew for a truth that his future lay there and not in the city. There was a chance for him to start over.

Maybe he wouldn't make it. His heart was already under strain. Maybe he wouldn't be able to find them again. But he had to try. On his own this time. It was the confrontation he had ducked all his life and would not duck again.

Decision brought a small bonus of libido. He stretched to full height and led off smartly with the left foot. He would go on until he could not put one foot in front of the other and then he would crawl.

Perhaps, with all their knowledge, they would know what he was doing. Either way, it did not matter. At this point in time he was doing what he had to do. ★

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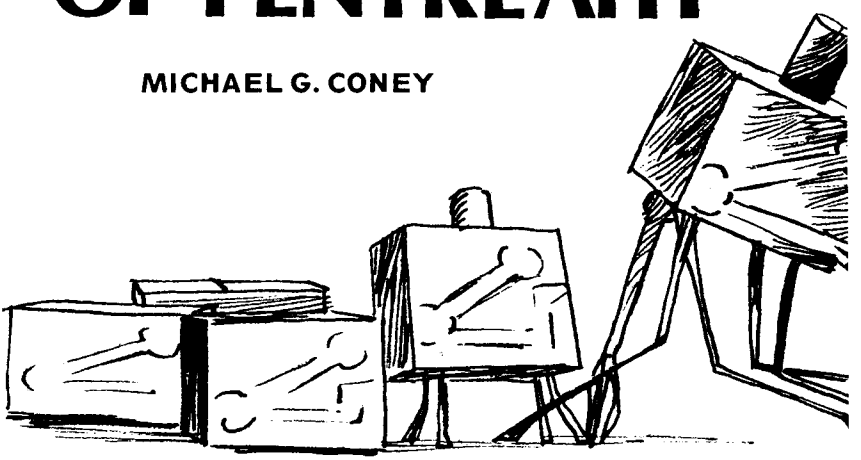
Earth had grown too crowded for man—but not for dreams!

THE SHARKS OF PENTREATH

MICHAEL G. CONEY



DURING the night there was a thunderstorm and I lay awake for some time as the scarlet curtains flared again and again to the incessant lightning. I got out of bed once and looked out across the harbor to the open sea flashing silver between the jagged black teeth of the twin headlands. I saw the boats heaving restlessly at anchor as the long waves rolled in and smashed against the stone quay, throwing high plumes of spray across the narrow waterfront street. I worried about the boats because two of them were assigned to me for my current Full-time; I had rented them with good money.

Then I thought about Gordon Ewell's jerry-built Grotto down the road, and I felt better. He had not allowed for this sort of weather in May.

I went back to bed. As I shrugged my head deeper into the pillow I saw Sylvia's eyes flicker open in alarm when another crack

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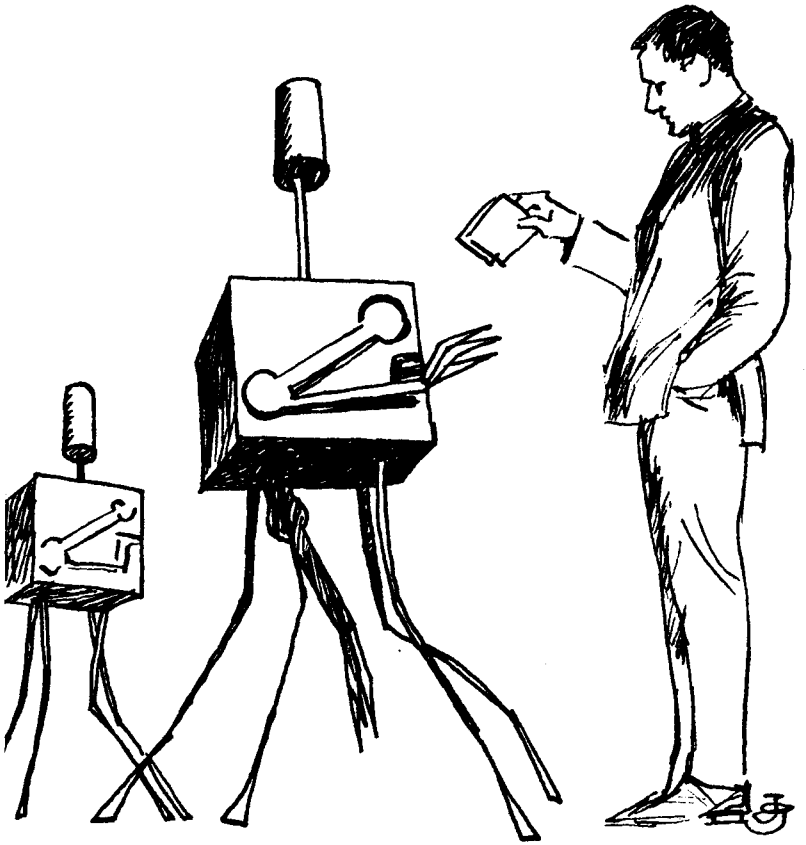

of thunder shook the village. Thunder frightened her; I knew she was thinking of suggesting she get into my bed. So I turned the other way and went to sleep.

By breakfast time the storm had passed over and a watery sun glinted from the puddles and sea with unnatural brilliance. We concluded our usual silent meal and I left Sylvia to wash up the things while I took a stroll down the street. Pentreath looked good that May morning and I hoped the weather would stay fine for the opening of the official tourist season. The facades of the buildings, freshly painted and gleaming with rain, looked much as they must have in the twentieth century and earlier; a rambling row of dissimilar stone and brick structures, some overhanging the street, some with jutting bow windows packed with curios, all restored with painstaking detail garnered from old photographs and picture postcards. Come to quaint Pentreath, the resort with character.

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Nearly all totally fake, of course—the stone and brick mostly recreated from modern materials—the facades are just that; behind the solid-looking fronts are prefabricated rooms decked out with imitation oak and plaster, extraordinarily convincing. But my place is real—The Treasure Trove Gifte Shoppe and Tea Rooms is the identical building which has stood for centuries on Pentreath quay, a genuine ancient monument.

I had rented the Treasure Trove in the earlier days; in successive Fulltime years I had come here and Sylvia and I had worked damned hard. After four years of this, punctuated by eight years of careful Shelflife, I had bought the place. Now we should be set for life. During our periods of Shelflife I let the place out; on the income we are able to send our remotors almost anywhere we please to enliven the enforced idleness. But we seldom go together. In December of last year I had my remotor adapted for skiing and enjoyed the winter sports at St. Moritz while I lay in comfort at the Shelflife Center, secure in my steel cabinet. Sylvia, however, monitored the Christmas festivities at the Center; her remotor never stirred out of the building but sat chattering to the other machines belonging to those people on Rotomation One too impoverished to remotravel. I can never understand why Sylvia likes people so much.

I crossed the street to the quayside and checked the rope that secured my dinghy. A glance across the harbor satisfied me that *Daffodil* and *Skylark* still rode smoothly at anchor—their chains had held fast during the night. I didn't expect any boat customers today but in a week or two, when the season warmed up, the craft would be in use continuously, trotting remotors around the bay on fishing trips.

Turning, I walked over to Ewell's Grotto. Ewell himself was busy with a broom, ineffectively sweeping water out of the entrance in muddy waves,

"Much damage last night?" I enquired.

He looked up. His young, weak face was flushed with effort.

"Could be worse, Mr. Green," he replied. "One or two rips in the canvas, that's all." He hesitated. "I wonder—could Mrs. Green lend me a hand and stitch things up a bit?"

I didn't reply but strolled inside to inspect the damage. Fiberglass stalagmites lay around in confusion and the canvas hung awry. A gaping hole in one wall had allowed leaves and twigs to blow in and the fairy pool was full of muck. The place was a mess.

Ewell's Grotto is a temporary structure; he dismantles it at the end of each Fulltime year and

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packs it away while he takes his two years Shelflife. Consequently he doesn't pay local siterates. I find this sort of situation annoying; people of Ewell's type are parasites feeding off gullible remotourists while the rest of us foot the bill. My own siterates are heavy.

"Oh, dear. What a shame." I swung around on hearing Sylvia's voice. She was standing at the entrance, regarding the devastation with dismay. Ewell hovered at her side, eager for sympathy. "Look, Gordon," she continued, "I'll slip home and fetch the sail-making things and get the canvas sewn up while John helps you clear up the mess. I won't be a minute."

She departed, leaving me in helpless irritation. It wasn't the first time she had volunteered my services to help a competitor. Ewell was grinning at me gratefully—being unmarried, he is insensitive to nuances of behavior between married couples.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Green," he said as we started to tidy the place up.

IT TOOK about an hour to get the Grotto presentable and set up Ewell's ridiculous little gift shop, a rough imitation rock counter at the back of the tent complex which Sylvia and he loaded carefully with worthless trinkets and postcards. I left Sylvia to help with the finishing touches and went out to see to the Herefords.

The Herefords are another of those touches of authenticity of which I am rather proud. The herd numbers twenty white-faced brown brutes of no practical purpose save to stand around the large field at the back of the waterfront street and look picturesquely rustic. Sylvia once tried making genuine Cornish Beef Pies for the Tea Room but the experiment was a failure. The few Fulltime tourists we get, together with the locals, found the variable consistency of real meat repulsive and quickly reverted to synthetics. The remotors, which constitute the vast majority of tourists, do not eat and seemed reluctant to burden themselves with perishable pies to take back to the Shelflife Centers.

On the strength of the Herefords, however, they do buy our Olde Englishe Clotted Cream which, laughably, is synthetic.

In the bright sun this morning the Herefords looked wonderful, posing in powerful attitudes against the background of grass, hillside and puffclouded sky—like a nineteenth-century oil painting. One of the animals, a large cow under a tall cedar, was bellowing realistically. For a moment I toyed with the idea of herding them down outside the back windows of the Tea Room but decided to leave that until later. In their present

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position they could be seen from the coach park at the top of the village.

I unlocked my small shed and took out the signs. Labeling the cattle is a long job but worthwhile from an advertising point of view. The signs are large and heavy and I can only carry two at a time, so it was an hour before I had finished; but by ten o'clock each cow carried, slung across its broad back and hanging down either flank, twin boards reading: THE SHELFLIFE OF GREEN'S CREAM IS AS LONG AS YOUR OWN.

I surveyed the field and was satisfied. In the distance, over the crest of the hill, the sun reflected from the roofs of the approaching coaches.

BY THE time I reached the coach park the vehicles were arriving, groaning and spewing archaic diesel smoke. There were two, each about eight feet wide and thirty long with deep, unnecessary windows running the length of the sides. Painted scarlet, they bore the words MIDLAND RED along their sides. In front, just below the roof line, were placards reading ROTOMATION 2 and ROTOMATION 3.

They pulled into the park and halted side by side. The din of internal combustion ceased. The drivers jumped out, carrying lists, held a leisurely conversation, then strolled to the rear of the vehicles. I followed. I like to know the worst, right away.

I needn't have worried. The coaches were packed with remotourists. The driver of Rotomation 2 jerked open the twin doors and began to hand down the metallic boxes to his companion, who laid them carefully on the ground. I positioned myself above the first box, a cube with dimensions something under two feet, and waited while it shifted, lifted itself three feet from the ground on telescopic legs, then extended a slender, gleaming neck from the center of the cube. At the top of the neck was the head, cylindrical and about six inches in diameter, about level with my own.

The robot spoke, "Good morning," it said politely.

"Are you in charge of Rotomation 2?" I asked.

"That's right. Name's Tom Lynch. Gloucester Shelflife Center."

"John Green," I said, grasping the stubby hand projecting from the side of the cube, "of the Treasure Trove Gifte Shoppe and Tea Rooms." I produced my handout. "Here you are. You'll find us about halfway along the waterfront. I'll make it worth your while."

"Ah, Mr. Green." If it were possible for a remotor to stiffen, Lynch would have stiffened. "This tour is in no way regimented. I

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don't shepherd these people around. The idea is, they do what they want for the day."

I meet this type sometimes. "I'm aware of that." I tried to match his air of dignity. "But you're in a position to make suggestions. That's all I meant."

"Yes," replied the remotor ambiguously, turning away and allowing my handout to flutter to the ground. "On your feet, folks!" His voice became jovial as he addressed the gangling forms lurching around, getting used to their legs. "We've only got a day here. Get set to enjoy yourselves! Hurry! Hurry—"

Within a short while both coaches were unloaded.

"That's progress for you." The driver of Rotomation 2 spoke; he leaned against the side of his coach, smoking. "This used to be a forty-seater. Now it holds three hundred. Pack 'em in—" He chuckled cynically.

"That's the story of Rotomation," I agreed. "Why do you use these old vehicles?"

"Adds color to the deal. My company, we've got fifty of these. Used to take Fulltime tourists about but it didn't pay, not at forty to a coach. Even though the coaches are authentic and we charged accordingly. So we switched to remotors and advertised at the Shelflife Centers. Genuine tours just like grandpa used to take. Those your cows?"

"Yes."

"Nice touch. One thing I miss, though. I'm sixty, been driving all my life. Time was, years ago, I drove real tourists around, before Rotomation. Used to get girls, unaccompanied like." He sniggered. "Nowadays, how do I know what they look like, one remotor is just like the next? You can't even tell the age, not unless you ask a remotor straight out. Look a bit silly when you find you're chatting up an old dear of seventy." He sighed. "Anyway, I'm getting a bit old for that game."

He looked it. Thin gray hair straggled across the parchment skin of his lined brow. Suddenly I tired of his reminiscences. The remotourists were pouring down the village in a silver tide and I had work to do. I walked away, leaving him staring ruminatively at his moist cigarette.

THE coach park belongs to a friend of mine by the name of Charles Judd. He charges by the head and makes a good living from this and his remotor repair shop. He picked up the coach park cheap, too, from an old fellow disheartened by the fall in land values following Rotomation.

In order that the appearance of Pentreath remain unspoiled the local council insists on Charles' site at the clifftop being the only coach park near the village. Well

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away from the cluster of buildings at the waterfront, the park has a rough path leading down to the main street. The view is superb and gives a good initial impression to the remotourist.

Charles has an interesting sideline; he has affixed at the seaward side of the park a notice which states that persons descending to the beach by the cliff path do so at their own risk. The cliff path, as distinct from the proper path to the village, is barely negotiable.

The remotourist is naturally adventurous. He has little to lose; should his remotor be damaged in some stupid escapade he merely pays to have it repaired, while himself lying in comfort at the Shelflife Center, experiencing exciting events through his imperiled robot's senses. I do quite well in heavy seas that way; the boats are comprehensively insured.

As a result many remotourists, rather than take the safe road to the village, will see Charles' sign and attempt the cliff path. A Full-time human can manage it if he has a strong head for heights, but remotors are not so agile.

And sure enough, as I passed the sign grinning to myself as always at the shrewdness of Charles' idea, I heard cries for help.

I hurried to the repair shop, a wooden shack at the village end of the park, and banged on the door. Charles appeared with a telescopic leg in his hand.

"You've got customers on the cliff path," I informed him.

His expression brightened. "Thanks," he said. He fetched a rope from inside the shack and hurried to the cliff-top. I tagged along to watch the fun.

"Hang on to this, will you, John?" He tied the rope about his waist and handed me the end. "Take a turn around that post. Not that I expect to fall; I could climb this cliff blindfold." He chuckled and scrambled over the edge. I paid the rope out, keeping it taut around the post. Presently there was a jerk. I began to pull in. Charles reappeared with a pair of remotors in tow. The rescue operation was slickly complete. "Fine," he said, dusting himself down. "That'll be twenty-five for the two of you, please." The remotors paid up without a murmur, digging the notes out of a large yellow bag.

I accompanied the robots down the sensible path to the village. They seemed not to be suffering from any shortage of cash; I wanted to get them into the Treasure Trove among the souvenirs.

"What a nice man," remarked one of the remotors. I saw from the name tag that it was woman, Lucy Allbright. "How lucky that he happened to be around, Al."

Albert Allbright laughed. "Don't kid yourself, Lucy. He makes useful money from his rescue setup. And I wouldn't be sur-

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prised if our friend here were in on it, too."

"Not me," I said hastily. "I own a gift shop. My name's Green, by the way."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Green." They introduced themselves unnecessarily. "You must be Green's Cream," remarked Al.

"We have to take some of that back," added Lucy.

"All genuine stuff," I murmured.

"I'm sure. We first came here over forty years ago, you know." I couldn't tell whether the statement was intended to be significant. "Haven't been back since. From where we are now, it looks much the same, doesn't it, Lucy?"

This couple must be pretty old, I decided. They were the sort of tourists we wanted. Sentimental and with money to spare.

I TOOK them to the Treasure Trove and introduced them to Sylvia. In minutes they were chatting with her like old friends—Sylvia has this effect on people—so I left the three of them at the table. The Tea Room seats about twenty-five and there were one or two Fulltime villagers in, drinking coffee and eating buns, generally adding a touch of local color. This is very necessary. Remotors do not, obviously, eat or drink—but remotorists like to sit down from time to time in an authentic atmosphere and watch other folks or chat with locals. The Tea Room, basically, serves as a meeting place where remotorists get to know each other in attractive surroundings, buy Green's Cream, and then wander around the Treasure Trove, spending the rest of their budget for the day.

I passed through the doorway that separates the Tea Room from the Shoppe and was pleased to find the latter full of chattering remotors lurching among the counters on spindly legs, spending freely.

Well satisfied, I let myself out and strolled along the waterfront to the Smugglers' Arms. The public bar at this hour was almost empty; Jack Rivers was swabbing the counter in desultory fashion, the air smelled of disinfectant and the parrot was muttering unpleasantly to itself, occasionally plucking at the bars of its cage like an ill-tempered harpist. I ordered a pint and sat down.

"Aah, it be a fine mornin', stranger."

"For God's sake, Bert," I snapped. "It's me, Green."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Green." The old man's eyes focused with rheumy difficulty. "All the same, I'll have a pint, please."

"Not from me you won't. Wait till the tourists start coming in."

Bert Jennings is the village character and quite good at it. His line

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is to trade homespun philosophy and weather forecasts for drinks while sitting in an ancient wheelback chair in the corner of the bar. The romotourists spot him and cluster around as he clutches an empty mug in both mittened, arthritic hands and tells them the history of the village in a quavering voice. After a while the remotors buy him a drink and move away, pick up a stone jar of homemade Cornish Mead to take back to the Center, and drift out into the street, to be replaced by further seekers after information. We have an arrangement in Pentreath. If a remotourist wants details of village history, we send them to Bert. While the rest of us sell souvenirs and experiences, he sells words.

I often wonder what happens while we are all on Shelflife and the village is in the hands of Rotomation 2 and 3. Do they, too, have their village sage? Once or twice while at the Center I have contemplated sending my remotor to Pentreath to find out exactly what goes on, but I have never gotten around to it; there are too many other places to see.

"Hi, John. Thanks for the customers." Charles Judd was standing at the bar. He handed me a beer.

"Thanks. I took them into the Tea Room after, and let Sylvia loose on them."

Charles smiled. "A wife in a million. She makes more money with her personality than you with all your schemes."

"I'm not too sure about that." I frowned. They don't know what it's like to live with somebody who seems to like everyone except me. "She sometimes forgets that we do all this for money."

"Come off it, John. You know you couldn't do without her."

I fought back my irritation. Barroom banter is not my line. "Sometimes I wish it were permissible to exchange Rotomations. I'd like to see some new faces."

"Fine," he chuckled. "Leave her with me. Oh, by the way—" He sat down, pulled his chair close. "I heard some disturbing news today. From a fellow on Rotomation Two, who came here last year, while Rotomation Three was in charge."

"Oh?"

"It seems they dropped prices all around and advertised the fact. It's the first I've heard about it. I don't think it'll be the last. This guy on Two wanted a small repair job done this morning. He called me a crook when I told him the price."

"What?" This was serious. Those of us who own our businesses let them to other Rotomations on the strict understandings that prices be maintained. "We'll have to put this before the Chamber of Commerce," I said.

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"And I tell you another thing. Ewell's selling cream in his Grotto."

"What?" Poaching on one another's preserves is something we don't do. I got to my feet. "I'll deal with this right away. I'll have that little swine thrown out of the Chamber!"

"Hold it. He's not a member. His is a temporary structure. He doesn't pay local siterates either."

"I know that." I charged out of the bar, incensed. I had to see Sylvia immediately. She had helped Ewell set up his stall this morning. She must have seen the cream. What the hell was she thinking of?

I STORMED into the Tea Room to find Sylvia still seated at a table with the Allbrights. This did not improve my temper. She should have been showing them around the Treasure Trove by now. She looked up as I entered.

"Oh, John." She smiled at me brightly, insensitive to my mood. "Mr. Allbright was just telling me. Did you know—he knew this place before Rotomation? They spent their honeymoon here. He says the place has hardly changed."

"Sit down, Mr. Green." The remotourist waved me to a vacant chair. "That's right, Sylvia. Mind you, the people have changed. I don't suppose any of the old ones are left now."

"I wonder if you knew Bert Jennings," Sylvia said.

"Had you thought of taking a fishing trip?" I asked hastily.

"Bert Jennings? That wouldn't be young Bert—do you remember, Lucy? He showed us how to catch bass? I wonder now—" The remotor fell silent, thinking then: "Where can we find him?"

"He'll be in the Smugglers'. He's always there at this hour." Sylvia seemed determined to send our customers elsewhere.

"What luck," exclaimed Allbright. "We must have a word with him. I'm sure it's the same man. You know—" He looked around, cylindrical head pivoting, "You've done a wonderful job with this place. It's almost exactly as I remember it. You can't know what it means to Lucy and me to come back here and see it all again."

"Last time I suppose the village was packed with Fulltime tourists," Sylvia remarked.

"You can't imagine the crowds—of course, everyone was Fulltime then. It was two years before Rotomation came in—earth was crowded, believe me. You could hardly move. The roads were one solid traffic jam. But now, well, look at the coaches we came in. Three hundred people in such a small space. Oh, yes—Rotomation was a wonderful idea."

"And it solved the food problem, Al. Don't forget that," Lucy pointed out.

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"Oh, yes. Things were getting difficult. I won't say we were starving—but some of us were hungry. Now—in two years Shelflife a person only consumes a few gallons of drip. Of course, we all eat during our Fulltime year but that's only one-third of the population."

"How do you enjoy Shelflife?" asked Sylvia. "After having known what it was like before."

"Fine. I'm packed away comfortably in Gloucester. I'm conscious of my mind and body being there but only when I think about it. In my first two years Shelflife I adapted completely. It seemed strange to go on Fulltime again when my Rotomation came round."

"The remotors are good," said Lucy, nodding her shining head in a way which somehow betrayed her real age.

I was still trembling with rage; I wanted to get Sylvia alone. I think they sensed it.

"Well." Allbright stood up suddenly. "We must be going. My, it feels good to be young again. My real body's pretty feeble now, you know."

In an effort to be polite I managed to join the conversation at last. "You won't try to take your wife down that cliff in your next Fulltime, then?"

I had been tactless. I could tell by the pause before he replied but I was too mad at Sylvia to care.

"We're truly young only once," he replied at last quietly. "It's always as well to make the best of things while you can, Mr. Green." He glanced from Sylvia to myself. "Remotors are good but they're no substitute for flesh and blood. We climbed that cliff over forty years ago. We won't do it again."

His wife spoke. "Where do you recommend we go now, dear?" she asked Sylvia.

"You must see Gordon Ewell's Grotto," she replied at once. "And then why not slip into the Smugglers' and have a word with Bert Jennings?"

"Fine. That would be interesting. Oh, and before we go, I must have some of your cream to take back."

"I shouldn't bother now," said Sylvia. "You don't want to carry it about all day. You can pick it up later. The Grotto sells it as well, if that's nearer for you."

THE sight of a woman crying moves me to fury. It is unnecessary; an attempt to take unfair advantage, calculated to turn logical defeat into a moral victory. I suppose she expected me to apologize.

"And you can cut out the tears," I told her. "Once and for all, get it into your head that we're in this for the money. To save for our Shelflife so that we can send our remotors out anywhere we like

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and enjoy ourselves. We get people in and we *sell*. Is that clear?"

"But why can't we enjoy ourselves all the time?" she asked. "Do we have to behave like the other sharks in the village? Like your friend Charles?"

"Charles is okay. He's a good businessman. What about your friend Ewell and his fake Grotto?"

"John, everyone knows Gordon's Grotto is fake. The tourists know it. There's no pretense about it. Gordon's a nice fellow."

I could feel the rage boiling up again, a sick volcano in my stomach. "By God, anyone would think you were in love with that lousy little creep." I was losing control of myself; I seized her by the shoulders and shook her. "Are you, Sylvia? Are you?"

She bit her lip and gave me a patient look; I very nearly slapped her face. "You know I'm not, John," she said quietly. "I'm in love with you. But sometimes I wish you could be a bit less—hard. This isn't dog eat dog—that sort of life finished when Rotomation came in. There's plenty for all of us."

"And how the hell did he get to selling cream?" I raged. "You helped him this morning. You must have seen it."

"I didn't think—"

"Where does he get it from? Where does he get this fake cream he sells in his fake Grotto?"

"I believe it's the same brand as ours. He just puts a different label on it, as we do."

"What? He doesn't even have any cows—" My head was spinning; I felt dizzy with rage and frustration. I swung around and left Sylvia standing there, her cheeks wet, her eyes wide and stupid. I slammed out the back way and strode into the field. The Herefords were grouped around the rear of the building. My gun was in the wooden shed. The canvas of Ewell's Grotto shone white in the sun. My hands were wet and shaking.

THEY say a thunderstorm clears the air. This may be so in other parts of the country but it doesn't usually apply to Pentreath. Here a fine spell may be broken by a storm, which is often the precursor of further storms and endless drizzling rain, day after day.

But the late afternoon of the first day of the tourist season was still delightful. The sun continued to shine unabated and as I climbed the cliff path life seemed pretty good. I reached the grassy knoll at the top and turned to admire the view. Across the tiny bay, on the opposite headland, were the two coaches, childrens' toys in the hard light. The village lay beneath me, the boats bobbing at anchor as the ebbing remnants of last night's heavy seas slapped against the quay. The village street glitter-

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ed with promenading remotors; the wreckage of Ewell's Grotto lay at the near end, canvas flattened and tent poles askew. There had been no customers for my boats but I was not particularly bothered; the Treasure Trove was doing well and I had decided to take the afternoon off; Sylvia and the assistants could cope.

"Lovely afternoon, Mr. Green."

I jumped, startled, and turned round. Two remotors were sitting further along the cliff, telescopic legs dangling over the edge.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Allbright—Mrs. Allbright. Yes, it's very nice," I replied none too enthusiastically. I find I am happiest when alone—inane conversation bores me. I leave that to Sylvia.

"It must be very pleasant living here for your Fulltime," remarked Mrs. A. "You're very lucky."

I don't like being told I'm lucky. "What do you do?" I asked.

"I work in a synthetics plant," replied Allbright. "Hard work for a man of my age. You have to watch the machinery. Particularly in January after the previous Rotomation goes off. There's never much maintenance done in December. They're too busy thinking what they're going to do with their Shelflife."

Across the bay a hooter brayed.

"Time to be getting back to the coaches," observed Allbright. They stood up. "Would you mind walking back with us, Mr. Green? I've got an idea which might interest you."

Together we descended to the village. "The Grotto looks a mess," I observed. "It's better to build solidly even if it does mean paying local siterates."

"I think it's a shame," said Mrs. Allbright. "You can tell a lot of work's gone into that place. When I saw those cows stampeding through and smashing it all up, I could have cried for the poor man."

"I wonder what set those cattle running," speculated her husband. "You could have lost a lot of money yourself, Mr. Green. Herefords are valuable beasts."

"I was lucky," I said. "You know, they've never done it before. I expect they were nervous after last night's storm and some sudden noise startled them. Although I can't say I'm too sorry about the Grotto. It's a fake. I feel it lowers the tone of the village."

"I think it's fun," said the old woman. "And how do you mean, a fake?"

"Well—it's not genuine."

She laughed. "Oh, dear. Well now, just tell me what is."

"My Herefords are genuine."

"In what way? Do they have any practical use as cows used to? Do the boats and the Smugglers' Haunt and your Tea Room—and Bert Jennings?"

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"Bert Jennings?" I was puzzled and a little annoyed.

"Which is the real Bert Jennings?" she asked. "The old character who sits in the bar for one year out of three, putting on his act, or the remotor who goes skiing and flying and climbs Everest for the other two years? On a time basis it ought to be the remotor."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Green." Allbright chuckled. "Lucy gets these moods. She has few illusions—both of us have. The point is, we came here on our honeymoon—ages ago—and we had a wonderful time. Today, after all these years, we thought we'd come back and see the old place. We didn't expect to find it quite the same and it wasn't. But it's still wonderful. You've all done a great job of maintaining the appearance; the sea is still here—and the beach and the harbor and the cliffs. It's still Pentreath. And as for fake souvenirs and synthetic cream and shabby sideshows, well, they had those forty years ago, too. I tell you, nothing's changed very much. There's no need to feel defensive about things here."

The path narrowed and they moved ahead. I saw they were actually holding hands. Two remotors holding hands, for God's sake, like a couple of starcrossed lovers. I thought about Sylvia and myself in forty years' time . . .

We were passing the Treasure Trove when he made his suggestion. The narrow street was full of gleaming remotors stilting their way toward the coaches.

"It used to be a guest house, you know. They put people up for the night as the Smugglers' did. Have you ever thought of doing so again in those bedrooms upstairs? Nobody else in the village does. I've asked."

"But we don't get guests," I objected. "Everyone works during Fulltime except the very rich and they go abroad."

"I mean putting remotors up in proper rooms, in beds, instead of just packing them away for the night. It'd be a novel idea. You could advertise all-inclusive fishing weeks."

"Remotors in beds?" I couldn't help laughing—the idea seemed so ridiculous.

"No, I'm serious. Lucy and I would have enjoyed staying in a real bedroom and having a whole week here. Delivery could be arranged with the coach people. After all, even remotourists get tired of rushing from place to place all the time, particularly the older ones like us."

Most tourists, if you allow yourself to get drawn into conversation, will make suggestions as to how trade could be improved. I thought I'd heard it all—from paddle steamers to traveling circuses. But I'd never

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before heard of letting furnished bedrooms to remotors. They cannot experience discomfort, so what's wrong with the trundling coach, which saves overnight time between one stop and the next? And in any case, why should anyone want to spend more than one day in any place? The truth of the matter was, they were a couple of sentimentalists who wanted to relive their ancient honeymoon in as much detail as possible. Fulltime traveling is expensive and cuts into valuable money-earning days.

I was still chuckling to myself as, hand in steel hand, they climbed the hill to the coach park. The shadow of the setting sun pursued us up the slope; the village was in dusk against the crimson-capped black hillside.

We reached the coaches. Allbright extended a silver claw. "Goodbye, Mr. Green," he said. "Would you say thank you to Sylvia for us for making our day so pleasant."

He turned to his wife. "Bye, Lucy," he said.

"See you in Bristol, Al." They stood in silence for a moment, then slowly Mrs. Allbright withdrew herself into a cube. The coach driver, damp cigarette adhering to his lower lip, picked up the remotor and slid it into the rear entrance to the vehicle.

Allbright turned away and stalked across to the other coach. I followed, puzzled. "What goes on?" I asked.

"This is my coach," he replied shortly.

"I don't understand," I muttered. I suddenly got an inkling of something I didn't want to know.

"It's quite simple, Mr. Green. Lucy and I married young and hastily. Soon we fought. I think you know how married couples can fight. We thought we hated each other. In two years we were divorced. Single people again. Free. You understand?"

"No." But I understood. Oh, God, I understood.

"Rotomation came along. They put us on different shifts. We kept in touch and met again as remotors. There are certain things in life we find out too late. Mistakes we cannot correct."

It is not permissible to exchange Rotomations.

"I haven't seen Lucy—*seen* her—for forty years."

He stiffened and began to sink to the ground. I watched.

At my feet was a silver box with hairline cracks on the top.

An inert, lifeless silver box; the driver lifted it into the coach.

A piece of precision machinery.

A cube.

I turned and ran toward the setting sun, toward the village, Sylvia. The sun must have been strong because my eyes were smarting. ★

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(Continued from page 3)

The scientific rationale for *The Year of the Cloud* is convincingly worked out, as it was in *Clone*. The menace is as deceptively simple as was the life form that grew out of the sewers. This time, it's a gradual increase in the viscosity of the Earth's water, which, as worked out by the authors, can be seen to be quite sufficient for the total destruction of life on Earth as we know it, and not too quietly, either. The cities of the Earth are destroyed, about fifty percent of the population is dead before the book even begins to peak out, and there is literally no place to hide. Nevertheless this is a bad book, and *Clone* was a good book.

This is a bad book in many ways. The writing is dull through long sections. Although the protagonists move across considerable distances of land, with the action ranging from Hawaii to San Francisco, from San Francisco to New York, and from New York to the Bahamas, one gets neither a sense of actual motion on their part, nor the feeling that the book is advancing very far. Some of the syntax is idosyncratic, or at least parochial. Several times one encounters a sentence such as "The cities of the coastal plains didn't stand a chance even."

This and several similar recurring quirks strike the reader rather hard, particularly since they invariably come at the end of long, slow, descriptive passages which are probably intended to convey the mood of enervation settling over the protagonists as their energies flag and their despair mounts. But the mood passages are too long and too similar to the narrative taffy-pulling used by standard daytime television serial writers.

Then, some rather promising characters pop into being—notably the girl who eventually settles down to become the mate of one of the chief protagonists. She's an extremely complex character, with a great many half-delineated traits. But she simply appears in the book, and then turns out to be occupying a hefty number of words in it, without ever really contributing very much to its progress and without undergoing any great change of her own.

(Personally, the one thing I do wish I knew more about was exactly how she learned how to become an excellent journalistic photographer simply by having done a stint posing for dirty pictures. There are very few similarities in the field conditions, the lighting techniques, or the equipment required).

What I'm really saying with all of these quibbles is not that any given sentence in the book is dull. Neither Kate nor Ted have staked

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any major claims as prose poets, but both of them are narrators talented enough to evoke a poetic mood, or any other mood they select. When they've got it rolling, they can induce a sense of unimpeded flow and a breathless suspension of not only disbelief but of any other sense that might interfere between the reader and his enjoyment of the story.

So what this book really doesn't have is that essential ingredient of tension which would override the occasional lapse in prose technique that can occur with a collaborative book. The mixture is almost as it was in *Clone*, but what is missing, finally, I think, is that sense of purposefulness on the part of the cloud through which the Earth passes at the beginning of all the events.

It is true that at the end, the book suddenly throws in a reference to the fact that the cloud can't have occurred there by accident. It must have been "placed." (Where is the evidence for this?)

But by the time this brick arrives in place of a life-ring, it's either a copout or an auctorial admission of awareness that the book is in serious trouble and needs a quick shot of adrenalin. Else it marks the spot where Wilhelm and Thomas should have begun a science-fiction novel of alien meddling, rather than a novel of science-fiction horror. That latter, I think, is what they were trying for. And this review, I hope, is an effort to start them thinking on how they might organize their next plot, because when they do it right they do it very well.

AVON BOOKS, as some of you might know, was a genuine power in paperback publishing some twenty years ago, when it and Signet represented the only serious rivals to Pocket on the newsstands. There have been many evolutionary changes in publishing since then, and I have no idea of the present net worth of Avon as compared to, for instance, the Olympia Press. But just looking at newsstands, employing roughly the same sensory equipment I was using twenty years ago, I would say that Avon is on its way back, strongly, under the editorial direction of George Ernsberger.

Among other things, George has produced a recent series of highly attractive and well qualified science-fiction books. But the one I want to talk about is one I bought on my own hook, because it falls in with my predeliction for political thriller fiction *(Fail-Safe, Seven Days in May,* etc.). This is a book called *Pre-Empt* by John Vorhies (Avon/V2273/75¢), and is beyond a doubt the best book in this genre that has ever crossed my horizon. I've no idea who Vorhies is, but he not only understands politics, and *realpolitik* and all

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that other stuff, he also understands narrative.

You have to get past the rather unfortunate graphic design and blurb writing on the cover. In fact, as usual, you're better off ignoring the blurbs.

Vorhies' sense of narrative is so strong that he's able to make a virtue of a technique that usually fails. That is, he tells the story entirely in the form of letters and memos covering the events.

The crucial event is the mutinous seizure of the nuclear submarine *Nathan Hale* by its captain, who supplied with a number of thermonuclear missiles, and equipped with enough resources to stay underwater and undetected for months, informs the world that unless it convenes an international council to supervise and enforce nuclear disarmament, he will begin hitting the world's major cities one by one.

In the beginning, of course, both the captain's scheme and the book itself sound like another melodramatic potboiler. As depicted on the cover of *Pre-Empt*, and as originally pictured in the initial reports about him, he is a rigid militarist who has suddenly turned completely fanatical and is waving his fists in all directions, playing with his big toy. But Vorhies is considerably smarter than that, and soon begins to show it at a skillfully measured and perfectly controlled pace.

Bit by bit, paragraph by paragraph, memo by memo, Vorhies begins turning the captain and his scheme into creations of complete credibility. As events develop and such parties as the President of the United States and the Premier of the Soviet Union, as well as the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, begin delving into the background of these events, detail matches with detail. It becomes obvious that what is happening here may be a conspiracy launched twenty-five years ago—that is to say, in the late 1940s. But more likely it may be, simply, the effect of the environment of the past quarter-century on the hearts and minds of sincere, capable individuals entrusted with awesome technological and/or political power.

Which is to say that Vorhies moves us through successive layers of melodrama and then drama and finally something very much resembling documentary narrative, while simultaneously moving us down through increasingly complex layers of reader involvement. What begins as something on approximately the level of *Thunderball* quickly attains and overtakes the pseudo-profundity of *Fail-Safe*, the routine mechanics of *Red Alert*, the slick irony of *Dr. Strangelove*, and begins taking on the proportions of a major statement.

Pre-Empt verges on going be-

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yond the specific problem of political man and nuclear power and gets very close to being a novel about Man and power. It's a hell of a book as a literary accomplishment, particularly for something that turns up on the newsstands with a thriller cover on it.

NOW, the book takes some positions with which one might seriously quarrel. The ostensible villain—that is to say, the force which eventually defeats the onset of genuine world disarmament—is the American political system, as exemplified by the relationship shown here between the legislative branch and the executive.

At the end of the book, as we have known from the beginning, Congress successfully impeaches the President for having "surrendered American sovereignty," although the immediate excuse is a convenient trumped-up charge.

We are shown that under the circumstances of the present nuclear state, it is impossible for the individual chief executive to make genuine individual decisions in the event of nuclear crisis; that the inertia of twenty-five years of legislative decision, entwined with twenty-five years of military/executive decisions and preconceptions, have robbed the chief executive of any genuine power to react in any original manner.

Since none of the pre-set plans include automatic procedures for dealing with *hopeful* nuclear situations, the President—the man who supposedly has his own finger on the button—is in fact powerless to react in any manner save destructively. If he does attempt to react in what this book depicts as a sane, sensible and noble manner, he does save the world from nuclear holocaust for the time being, but he does so at the price of his own career and honor, and in the end he gains nothing—the system defeats all nobility and returns the world to a position even a little closer to catastrophe than it was before the President, the Premier and the captain of the *Nathan Hale* all laid their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor on the line.

It is possible in reading this book to draw the conclusion that the American system is the true villain in this world; that the sum total of all the decisions made since the United States took the responsibility of nuclear power has so crystallized our posture that we, uniquely among all the nations of the world, have the simple choice either of preserving the condition of marginal catastrophe, or of completely dissolving our political and national structure. And naturally, like any other organism, we would rather die than change.

But that's a false premise, I

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think, even on Vorhies' own terms. As depicted here, these are essentially personal conflicts. The Premier of the Soviet Union acts in the end not as the Premier, but as a man who, while young and attached to the Soviet Diplomatic Mission in Washington, D.C., formulated a world disarmament plan out of his own idealism, and out of his concern for the future safety of Mother Russia. The "renegade" sea captain, (who is magnificently depicted despite never appearing onstage), turns out to have been a similar sort of person. The President of the United States is, I think, basically a political creature, but with a basic underlayer of sound, middle-American common sense. On the other hand, many of the senators and congressmen and military figures depicted here are cartoons straight out of Strangelove. They have funny names and Al Capp personalities.

Still other supporting characters are neither realistic nor cartoony; they have names like Robert Fitsgerald, and are addressed as "Bobby," in the manner of Allen Drury.

So when you begin looking at it hard, it becomes plain that Vorhies had an argument he wanted to make even if it meant warping the structure of his analogy. The result is an extremely readable creation and a necessarily thought-provoking one, but one that undermines its own logical footing so that it falls short of objective truth.

Every piece of fiction falls short of objective truth, but political fiction—political science fiction, in this case—has, or should have, certain higher obligations to meet. Despite all that, *Pre-Empt* is a cracking good input to add to your picture of the world, but it disqualifies itself from candidature for a complete picture of the world as it really is.

What it is, really, is what would happen if you took Tom Sherred's *E For Effort*, (which, incidentally, was also written in this manner) and wanted to make a novel. Definitely, in that event, this is the kind of novel you would want to make.

NORMAN SPINRAD is a bright and talented fellow. The temptation is to refer to him as a young fellow and as a new writer on the horizon. But he's not that young any more and his work has been around for some time. Avon has just reprinted his collection, *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde*, containing stories whose copyright dates range upward from 1963 (a period in which he was writing for *Analog* with reasonable frequency) on up through 1969, when he was doing what appears to be his most interesting work, for *New Worlds*.

This book (Avon Science Fiction

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Novel V2368, 75¢) displays no particular consistent style. *Outward Bound* could easily have been written by Poul Anderson. *The Equalizer* has certain strong resemblances to Mack Reynolds' work. Gordon Dickson could easily have written *The Last of the Romany*; *Technicality* is much like a Randall Garrett story, and *Subjectivity* has a tendency to resemble something by Christopher Anvil.

Perhaps this is the kind of thing that Spinrad meant when he dedicated this book to The Grand Old Men of Science Fiction. Of course that doesn't explain the resemblance of *Carcinoma Angels* to something by Harlan Ellison. Nor does it explain the resemblance of *The Entropic Gang Bang Caper* and *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde* to the kind of thing the general run of *New Worlds* writers were trying to write in roughly the same way the *Analog* boys a few years ago were trying to write a particular kind of thing for *Analog*.

Reading these stories you become struck by Spinrad's breadth of awareness and by his ability to write a number of different styles well. He never rises above the level of simple, straightforward competence, mind you. His version of a Poul Anderson story, for instance, although some sort of special project in his own mind, is no better than any given story by Poul Anderson in the course of unreeling a whole stream of such creations. The snapper endings on *Once More With Feeling* and on *It's A Bird, It's A Plane* are telegraphed from the very beginning, as is the one on *Death Watch*. But that latter is from *Playboy*, where jangling surprises tend to dismay. *The Last of the Romany* delivers a genuine emotional punch. Unfortunately, it's the same type of punch that this type of story has been delivering at the hands of various people for many years now; we have to pass the credit back to John Campbell.

Judging by what's in this collection, Spinrad would have no trouble at all in writing something that was both individual and quite good. One might further guess that from having read *Bug Jack Barron*. But despite his capabilities as an individual, and his ability to adapt a wide variety of techniques, all Spinrad really shows us in this collection that can be said to be his individual and unimpeachable own is his attitude, which is a rather likable one.

Considered on its own merits, however, this collection is either a deliberate compilation of the kind of parody young writers love to do at parties or, alarmingly, it's taking Spinrad a very long time to stop synthesizing and start speaking with his own voice. ★

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THE HERO

He had one wish left—to fight his last war in peace!

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

THE city was dead and the flames of its passing spread a red stain across the green-gray sky.

It had been a long time dying. Resistance had lasted almost a week and the fighting had been bitter for a while. But in the end the invaders had broken the defenders, as they had broken so many others in the past. The alien sky with its double sun did not bother them. They had fought and won under skies of azure blue and speckled gold and inky black.

The Weather Control boys had hit first, while the main force was still hundreds of miles to the east. Storm after storm had flailed at the streets of the city, to slow defensive preparations and smash the spirit of resistance.

When they were closer the invaders had sent up howlers. Unending high-pitched shrieks had

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echoed back and forth both day and night and before long most of the populace had fled in demoralized panic. By then the attackers' main force was in range and launched plague bombs on a steady westward wind.

Even then the natives had tried to fight back. From their defensive emplacements ringing the city the survivors had sent up a hail of atomics, managing to vaporize one whole company whose defensive screens were overloaded by the sudden assault. But the gesture was a feeble one at best. By that time incendiary bombs were raining down steadily upon the city and great clouds of acid gas were blowing across the plains.

And behind the gas, the dreaded assault squads of the Terran Expeditionary Force moved on the last defenses.

KAGEN scowled at the dented plastoid helmet at his feet and cursed his luck. A routine mopping-up detail, he thought. A perfectly routine operation—and some damned automatic interceptor emplacement somewhere had lobbed a low-grade atomic at him.

It had been only a near miss but the shock waves had damaged his hip rockets and knocked him out of the sky, landing him in this god-forsaken little ravine east of the city. His light plastoid battle armor had protected him from the impact but his helmet had taken a good whack.

Kagen squatted and picked up the dented helmet to examine it. His long-range com and all of his sensory equipment were out. With his rockets gone, too, he was crippled, deaf, dumb and half-blind. He swore.

A flicker of movement along the top of the shallow ravine caught his attention. Five natives came suddenly into view, each carrying a hair-trigger submachine gun. They carried them at the ready, trained on Kagen. They were fanned out in line, covering him from both right and left. One began to speak.

He never finished. One instant, Kagen's screech gun lay on the rocks at his feet. Quite suddenly it was in his hand.

Five men will hesitate where one alone will not. During the brief flickering instant before the natives' fingers began to tighten on their triggers. Kagen did not pause, Kagen did not hesitate, Kagen did not think.

Kagen killed.

The screech gun emitted a loud, ear-piercing shriek. The enemy squad leader shuddered as the invisible beam of concentrated high-frequency sound ripped into him. Then his flesh began to liquefy. By then Kagen's gun had found two more targets.

The guns of the two remaining

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natives finally began to chatter. A rain of bullets enveloped Kagen as he whirled to his right and he grunted under the impact as the shots caromed off his battle armor. His screech gun leveled—and a random shot sent it spinning from his grasp.

Kagen did not hesitate or pause as the gun was wrenched from his grip. He bounded to the top of the shallow ravine with one leap, directly toward one of the soldiers.

The man wavered briefly and brought up his gun. The instant was all Kagen needed. With all the momentum of his leap behind it, his right hand smashed the gun butt into the enemy's face and his left, backed by fifteen hundred pounds of force, hammered into the native's body right under the breastbone.

Kagen seized the corpse and heaved it toward the second native, who had ceased fire briefly as his comrade came between himself and Kagen. Now his bullets tore into the airborne body. He took a quick step back, his gun level and firing.

And then Kagen was on him. Kagen knew a searing flash of pain as a shot bruised his temple. He ignored it, drove the edge of his hand into the native's throat. The man toppled, lay still.

Kagen spun, still reacting, searching for the next foe.

He was alone.

Kagen bent and wiped the blood from his hand with a piece of the native's uniform. He frowned in disgust. It was going to be a long trek back to camp, he thought, tossing the blood-soaked rag casually to the ground.

Today was definitely not his lucky day.

He grunted dismally, then scrambled back down into the ravine to recover his screech gun and helmet for the hike.

On the horizon, the city was still burning.

RAGELLI'S voice was loud and cheerful as it came crackling over the short-range communicator nestled in Kagen's fist.

"So it's you, Kagen," he said laughing. "You signaled just in time. My sensors were starting to pick up something. Little closer and I would've screeched you down."

"My helmet's busted and the sensors are out," Kagen replied. "Damn hard to judge distance. Long-range com is busted, too."

"The brass was wondering what happened to you," Ragelli cut in. "Made 'em sweat a little. But I figured you'd turn up sooner or later."

"Right," Kagen said. "One of these mudworms zapped the hell out of my rockets and it took me a while to get back. But I'm coming in now."

He emerged slowly from the crater he had crouched in, coming

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in sight of the guard in the distance. He took it slow and easy.

Outlined against the outpost barrier, Ragelli lifted a ponderous silver-gray arm in greeting. He was armored completely in a full duralloy battlesuit that made Kagen's plastoid armor look like tissue paper, and sat in the trigger-seat of a swiveling screech-gun battery. A bubble of defensive screens enveloped him, turning his massive figure into an indistinct blur.

Kagen waved back and began to eat up the distance between them with long, loping strides. He stopped just in front of the barrier, at the foot of Ragelli's emplacement.

"You look damned battered," said Ragelli, appraising him from behind a plastoid visor, aided by his sensory devices. "That light armor doesn't buy you a nickel's worth of protection. Any farm boy with a pea shooter can plug you."

Kagen laughed. "At least I can move. You may be able to stand off an Assault Squad in that duralloy monkey suit, but I'd like to see you do anything on offense, chum. And defense doesn't win wars."

"Your pot," Ragelli said. "This sentry duty is boring as hell." He flicked a switch on his control panel and a section of the barrier winked out. Kagen was through it at once. A split second later it came back on again.

Kagen strode quickly to his squad barracks. The door slid open automatically as he approached it and he stepped inside gratefully. It felt good to be home again and back at his normal weight. These light-gravity mudholes made him queasy after awhile. The barracks were artificially maintained at Wellington-normal gravity, twice Earth-normal. It was expensive but the brass kept saying that nothing was too good for the comfort of our fighting men.

Kagen stripped off his plastoid armor in the squad ready room and tossed it into the replacement bin. He headed straight for his cubicle and sprawled across the bed.

Reaching over to the plain metal table alongside his bed, he yanked open a drawer and took out a fat greenish capsule. He swallowed it hastily, and lay back to relax as it took hold throughout his system. The regulations prohibited taking synthastim between meals, he knew, but the rule was never enforced. Like most troopers, Kagen took it almost continuously to maintain his speed and endurance at maximum.

He was dozing comfortably a few minutes later when the com box mounted on the wall above his bed came to sudden life.

"Kagen."

Kagen sat up instantly, wide awake.

"Acknowledged," he said.

"Report to Major Grady at once."

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Kagen grinned broadly. His request was being acted on quickly, he thought. And by a high officer, no less. Dressing quickly in loose-fitting brown fatigues, he set off across the base.

The high officers' quarters were at the center of the outpost. They consisted of a brightly lit, three-story building, blanketed overhead by defensive screens and ringed by guardsmen in light battle armor. One of the guards recognized Kagen and he was admitted on orders.

Immediately beyond the door he halted briefly as a bank of sensors scanned him for weapons. Troopers, of course, were not allowed to bear arms in the presence of high officers. Had he been carrying a screech gun alarms would have gone off all over the building while the tractor beams hidden in the walls and ceilings immobilized him completely.

But he passed the inspection and continued down the long corridor toward Major Grady's office. A third of the way down, the first set of tractor beams locked firmly onto his wrists. He struggled the instant he felt the invisible touch against his skin—but the tractors held him steady. Others, triggered automatically by his passing, came on as he continued down the corridor.

Kagen cursed under his breath and fought with his impulse to resist. He hated being pinned by tractor beams, but those were the rules if you wanted to see a high officer.

THE door opened before him and he stepped through. A full bank of tractor beams seized him instantly and immobilized him. A few adjusted slightly and he was snapped to rigid attention, although his muscles screamed resistance.

Major Carl Grady was working at a cluttered wooden desk a few feet away, scribbling something on a sheet of paper. A large stack of papers rested at his elbow, an old-fashioned laser pistol sitting on top of them as a paperweight.

Kagen recognized the laser. It was some sort of heirloom, passed down in Grady's family for generations. The story was that some ancestor of his had used it back on Earth, in the Fire Wars of the early twenty-first century. Despite its age, the thing was still supposed to be in working order.

After several minutes of silence Grady finally set down his pen and looked up at Kagen. He was unusually young for a high officer but his unruly gray hair made him look older than he was. Like all high officers, he was Earth-born; frail and slow before the assault squad troopers from the dense, heavy-gravity War Worlds of Wellington and Rommel.

"Report your presence," Grady said curtly. As always, his lean,

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pale face mirrored immense boredom.

"Field Officer John Kagen, assault squads, Terran Expeditionary Force."

Grady nodded, not really listening. He opened one of his desk drawers and extracted a sheet of paper.

"Kagen," he said, fiddling with the paper, "I think you know why you're here." He tapped the paper with his finger. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Just what it says, Major," Kagen replied. He tried to shift his weight but the tractor beams held him rigid.

Grady noticed and gestured impatiently. "At rest," he said. Most of the tractor beams snapped off, leaving Kagen free to move, if only at half his normal speed. He flexed in relief and grinned.

"My term of enlistment is up within two weeks, Major. I don't plan to re-enlist. So I've requested transportation to Earth. That's all there is to it."

Grady's eyebrows arched a fraction of an inch but the dark eyes beneath them remained bored.

"Really?" he asked. "You've been a soldier for almost twenty years now, Kagen. Why retire? I'm afraid I don't understand."

Kagen shrugged. "I don't know. I'm getting old. Maybe I'm just getting tired of camp life. It's all starting to get boring, taking one damn mudhole after another. I want something different. Some excitement."

Grady nodded. "I see. But I don't think I agree with you, Kagen." His voice was soft and persuasive. "I think you're underselling the T.E.F. There is excitement ahead, if you'll only give us a chance." He leaned back in his chair, toying with a pencil he had picked up. "I'll tell you something, Kagen. You know, we've been at war with the Hrangan Empire for nearly three decades now. Direct clashes between us and the enemy have been few and far between up to now. Do you know why?"

"Sure," Kagen said.

Grady ignored him. "I'll tell you why," he continued. "So far each of us has been struggling to consolidate his position by grabbing these little worlds in the border regions. These mudholes, as you call them. But they're very important mudholes. We need them for bases, for their raw materials, for their industrial capacity and for the conscript labor they provide. "That's why we try to minimize damage in our campaigns. And that's why we use psychwar tactics like the howlers. To frighten away as many natives as possible before each attack. To preserve labor."

"I know all that," Kagen interrupted with typical Wellington bluntness. "What of it? I didn't come here for a lecture."

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Grady looked up from the pencil. "No," he said. "No, you didn't. So I'll tell you, Kagen. The prelims are over. It's time for the main event. There are only a handful of unclaimed worlds left. Soon now, we'll be coming into direct conflict with the Hrangan Conquest Corps. Within a year we'll be attacking their bases."

The major stared at Kagen expectantly, waiting for a reply. When none came, a puzzled look flickered across his face. He leaned forward again.

"Don't you understand, Kagen?" he asked. "What more excitement could you want? No more fighting these piddling civilians in uniform, with their dirty little atomics and their primitive projectile guns. The Hrangans are a real enemy. Like us, they've had a professional army for generations upon generations. They're soldiers, born and bred. Good ones, too. They've got screens and modern weapons. They'll be foes to give our assault squads a real test."

"Maybe," Kagen said doubtfully. "But that kind of excitement isn't what I had in mind. I'm getting old. I've noticed that I'm definitely slower lately—even Synthastim isn't keeping up my speed."

GRADY shook his head. "You've got one of the best records in the whole T.E.F., Kagen. You've received the Stellar Cross twice and the World Congress Decoration three times. Every com station on Earth carried the story when you saved the landing party on Torego. Why should you doubt your effectiveness now? We're going to need men like you against the Hrangans. Re-enlist."

"No," said Kagen emphatically. "The regs say you're entitled to your pension after twenty years and those medals have earned me a nice bunch of retirement bonuses. Now I want to enjoy them." He grinned broadly. "As you say, everyone on Earth must know me. I'm a hero. With that reputation, I figure I can have a real screech-out."

Grady frowned and drummed on the desk impatiently. "I know what the regulations say, Kagen. But no one ever really retires—you must know that. Most troopers prefer to stay with the front. That's their job. That's what the War Worlds are all about."

"I don't really care, Major," Kagen replied. "I know the regs and I know I have a right to retire on full pension. You can't stop me."

Grady considered the statement calmly, his eyes dark with thought.

"All right," he said after a long pause. "Let's be reasonable about this. You'll retire with full pension and bonuses. We'll set you down on Wellington in a place of your own. Or Rommel if you like. We'll make you a youth barracks director—

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any age group you like. Or a training camp director. With your record you can start right at the top."

"Uh-uh," Kagen said firmly. "Not Wellington. Not Rommel. Earth."

"But why? You were born and raised on Wellington—in one of the hill barracks, I believe. You've never seen Earth."

"True," said Kagen. "But I've seen it in camp telecasts and flicks. I like what I've seen. I've been reading about Earth a lot lately, too. So now I want to see what it's like." He paused, then grinned again. "Let's just say I want to see what I've been fighting for."

Grady's frown reflected his displeasure. "I'm from Earth, Kagen," he said. "I tell you, you won't like it. You won't fit in. The gravity is too low—and there are no artificial heavy gravity barracks to take shelter in. Synthastim is illegal, strictly prohibited. But War Wonders need it, so you'll have to pay exorbitant prices to get the stuff. Earthers aren't reaction trained, either. They're a different kind of people. Go back to Wellington. You'll be among your own kind."

"Maybe that's one of the reasons I want Earth," Kagen said stubbornly. "On Wellington I'm just one of hundreds of old vets. Hell, every one of the troopers who *does* retire heads back to his old barracks. But on Earth I'll be a celebrity. Why, I'll be the fastest, strongest guy on the whole damn planet. That's got to have some advantages."

Grady was starting to look agitated. "What about the gravity?" he demanded. "The Synthastim?"

"I'll get used to light gravity after a while, that's no problem. And I won't be needing that much speed and endurance, so I figure I can kick the Synthastim habit."

Grady ran his fingers through his unkempt hair and shook his head doubtfully. There was a long, awkward silence. He leaned across the desk.

And, suddenly, his hand darted towards the laser pistol.

Kagen reacted. He dove forward, delayed only slightly by the few tractor beams that still held him. His hand flashed toward Grady's wrist in a crippling arc.

And suddenly wrenched to a halt as the tractor beams seized Kagen roughly, held him rigid and then smashed him to the floor.

Grady, his hand frozen halfway to the pistol, leaned back in the chair. His face was white and shaken. He raised his hand and the tractor beams let up a bit. Kagen climbed slowly to his feet.

"You see, Kagen," said Grady. "That little test proves you're as fit as ever. You'd have gotten me if I hadn't kept a few tractors on you to slow you down. I tell you, we need men with your training and

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experience. We need you against the Hrangans. Re-enlist."

Kagen's cold blue eyes still seethed with anger. "Damn the Hrangans," he said. "I'm not re-enlisting and no goddamn little tricks of yours are going to make me change my mind. I'm going to Earth. You can't stop me."

Grady buried his face in his hands and sighed.

"All right, Kagen," he said at last. "You win. I'll put through your request."

He looked up one more time, and his dark eyes looked strangely troubled.

"You've been a great soldier, Kagen. We'll miss you. I tell you that you'll regret this decision. Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"Absolutely sure," Kagen snapped.

The strange look suddenly vanished from Grady's eyes. His face once more took on the mask of bored indifference.

"Very well," he said curtly. "You are dismissed."

The tractors stayed on Kagen as he turned. They guided him—very firmly—from the building.

"YOU ready, Kagen?" Ragelli asked, leaning casually against the door of the cubicle.

Kagen picked up his small travel bag and threw one last glance around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. He hadn't. The room was quite bare.

"Guess so," he said, stepping through the door.

Ragelli slipped on the plastoid helmet that had been cradled under his arm and hurried to catch up as Kagen strode down the corridor.

"I guess this is it," he said as he matched strides.

"Yeah," Kagen replied. "A week from now I'll be taking it easy back on Earth while you're getting blisters on your tail sitting around in that damned duralloy tuxedo of yours."

Ragelli laughed. "Maybe," he said. "But I still say you're nuts to go to Earth of all places, when you could command a whole damned training camp on Wellington. Assuming you wanted to quit at all, which is also crazy—"

The barracks door slid open before them and they stepped through, Ragelli still talking. A second guard flanked Kagen on the other side. Like Ragelli, he was wearing light battle armor.

Kagen himself was in full dress whites, trimmed with gold braid. A ceremonial laser, deactivated, was slung in a black leather holster at his side. Matching leather boots and a polished steel helmet set off the uniform. Azure blue bars on his shoulder signified field officer rank. His medals jangled against his chest as he walked.

Kagen's entire third assault squad was drawn up at attention on the spacefield behind the barracks in honor of his retirement.

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Alongside the ramp to the shuttlecraft, a group of high officers stood by, cordoned off by defensive screens. Major Grady was in the front row, his bored expression blurred somewhat by the screens.

Flanked by the two guards, Kagen walked across the concrete slowly, grinning under his helmet. Piped music welled out over the field, and Kagen recognized the T.E.F. battle hymn and the Wellington anthem.

At the foot of the ramp he turned and looked back. The company spread out before him saluted in unison on a command from the high officers and held the position until Kagen returned the salute. Then one of the squad's other field officers stepped forward, and presented him with his discharge papers.

Jamming them into his belt, Kagen threw a quick, casual wave to Ragelli, then hurried up the ramp. It lifted slowly behind him.

Inside the ship, a crewman greeted him with a curt nod. "Got special quarters prepared for you," he said. "Follow me. Trip should only take about fifteen minutes. Then we'll transfer you to a starship for the Earth trip."

Kagen nodded and followed the man to his quarters. They turned out to be a plain, empty room, reinforced with duralloy plates. A viewscreen covered one wall. An acceleration couch faced it.

Alone, Kagen sprawled out on the acceleration couch, clipping his helmet to a holder on the side. Tractor beams pressed down gently, holding him firmly in place for the liftoff.

A few minutes later a dull roar came from deep within the ship and Kagen felt several gravities press down upon him as the shuttlecraft took off. The viewscreen, suddenly coming to life, showed the planet dwindling below.

The viewer blinked off when they reached orbit. Kagen started to sit up but found he still could not move. The tractor beams held him pinned to the couch.

He frowned. There was no need for him to stay in the couch once the craft was in orbit. Some idiot had forgotten to release him.

"Hey," he shouted, figuring there would be a com box somewhere in the room. "These tractors are still on. Loosen the damned things so I can move a little."

No one answered.

He strained against the beams. Their pressure seemed to increase. The blasted things were starting to pinch a little, he thought. Now those morons were turning the knob the wrong way.

He cursed under his breath. "No," he shouted. "Now the tractors are getting heavier. You're adjusting them the wrong way."

But the pressure continued to climb and he felt more beams locking on him, until they covered his body like an invisible blanket. The

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damn things were really starting to hurt now.

"You idiots," he yelled. "You morons. Cut it out, you bastards." With a surge of anger he strained against the beams, cursing. But even Wellington-bred muscle was no match for tractors. He was held tightly to the couch.

One of the beams was trained on his chest pocket. Its pressure was driving his Stellar Cross painfully into his skin. The sharp edge of the polished medal had already sliced through the uniform and he could see a red stain spreading slowly through the white.

The pressure continued to mount and Kagen writhed in pain, squirming against his invisible shackles. It did no good. The pressure still went higher and more and more beams came on.

"Cut it out!" he screeched. "You bastards, I'll rip you apart when I get out of here. You're killing me, dammit!"

He heard the sharp snap of a bone suddenly breaking under the strain. Kagen felt a stab of intense pain in his right wrist. An instant later there was another snap.

"Cut it out!" he cried, his voice shrill with pain. "You're killing me. Damn you, you're killing me!"

And suddenly he realized he was right.

GRADY looked up with a scowl at the aide who entered the office.

"Yes? What is it?"

The aide, a young Earther in training for high officer rank, saluted briskly. "We just got the report from the shuttlecraft, sir. It's all over. They want to know what to do with the body."

"Space it," Grady replied. "Good as anything." A thin smile flickered across his face and he shook his head. "Too bad. Kagen was a good man in combat but his pysch training must have slipped somewhere. We should send a strong note back to his barracks conditioner. Though it's funny it didn't show up until now."

He shook his head again. "Earth," he said. "For a moment he even had me wondering if it was possible. But when I tested him with my laser, I knew. No way, no way." He shuddered a little. "As if we'd ever let a War Worlder loose on Earth." Then he turned back to his paperwork.

As the aide turned to leave, Grady looked up again.

"One other thing," he said. "Don't forget to send that PR release back to Earth. Make it War-Hero-Dies-When-Hrangans-Blast-Ship. Jazz it up good. Some of the big com networks should pick it up and it'll make good publicity. And forward his medals to Wellington. They'll want them for his barracks museum."

The aide nodded and Grady returned to his work. He still looked quite bored. ★

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SCRAMBLE

Nothing alive could get through the transmat—but what about the dead?

DAN MORGAN

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"FROGS, for God's sake!" Wexler yelled. "You mean this is it?"

Alex Crawford suppressed a sigh as he looked up into the red, ill-tempered face.

"Not exactly frogs," he said. "Humanoid amphibians."

Wexler turned back to the observation window that ran the entire length of the lounge. The station perched on a hill overlooking the lakeside village with its reed huts. It was early afternoon and several young males were gamboling happily in the water near a diving board Crawford had erected.

"They still look like frogs to me," Wexler said sourly. "Man-sized maybe, but frogs. The brochure said people."

"They are people," Crawford said. "With a near-human intelligence and a culture of their own. I've been studying them for nearly five years now and in a lot of ways they're more civilized than human beings. Crime and violence are completely unknown to them. They have a sense of community, while at the same time they preserve the integrity of the individual—"

He stopped talking as he recognized the contempt in Wexler's bulging, contact-lensed eyes.

"You some kind of alien-lover? Things like that have culture? Melanie and me are supposed to be on vacation. What do we do here? Isn't there anyone else around—other humans, I mean?"

"No, I'm alone here," said Crawford. "But the station is well equipped. Just name anything you want—food, drink, music."

Crawford was a slightly built man of below average height, with thinning sandy hair and a long-nosed, sensitive face that gave him the look of an intelligent mouse. He loved the peace and tranquility of Poligoy's lakes and forests. The thought of his ever returning to Earth with its teeming, frantic millions was a nightmare that jerked him awake sweating in the early morning hours.

It was strange how despite the advent of matter transmission which had enabled the human race to spread throughout the galaxies, Earth still maintained its population at the impossibly high twenty-first century level because of the inborn chauvinism of man, who insisted on looking upon that battered old planet as the center of the universe. Not so Alex Crawford, whose most fervent hope was that the corporation would allow him to stay on Poligoy when his contract was completed, to end his days in peace and blessed solitude, away from Earth and its multiplicity of Wexlers.

"The whole three of us? Big deal!" said Wexler. And then hopefully: "There's some hunting, maybe?"

"No projectile or energy weap-

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ons are allowed on a planet of this classification. But there's always spear-fishing, if you're any good at skin-diving."

"With my sinuses? You gotta be kidding."

"In that case, why not just relax and take it easy?"

"Relax, hell. I told you, we're on vacation. We're supposed to be enjoying ourselves two hundred and fifty credits' worth a day each—and if we don't that corporation of yours had better get itself a good lawyer. In the brochure it distinctly said there would be people here and plenty to do—" Wexler squinted in an effort at recall. "I remember reading something about 'the laughing, happy brown folk of Aruman IV welcome Earth visitors to their paradise planet, opening their hearts and homes.' And there was this picture of a broad with boobs like—"

MELANIE WEXLER entered the lounge at that moment and Crawford never got to hear the second half of the simile, or for that matter to telling Wexler that he was on Poligoy—not Aruman IV. Even if he had intended to do so, the reappearance of Melanie, who had retired to the washroom immediately on arrival, would have pushed the idea right out of his mind.

From the first moment Melanie Wexler had materialized on the receiving grid he had felt himself drowning happily in the depths of those wide blue eyes. By any standards Melanie Wexler was a dish, a doll, a cracker. Slightly shorter than himself, she had a perfect figure and a gorgeously piquant little face framed by blond hair that hung down over her shoulders in carefully cultivated disarray—and a way of looking at a man that made him feel three meters tall and muscular with it.

"Well, now, that feels so much better," said Melanie, treating Crawford to a dazzling smile that upped his blood pressure several points, then turning her attention to her husband. "Is something wrong, Harry?"

"We've been conned, is all," growled Wexler, pointing to the observation window. "Take a look at this paradise planet."

Melanie walked to the window. Crawford blushed deeply as he watched her hip movement and thanked whatever gods had charge of such matters that neither of the Wexlers was telepathic.

"Harry, you do complain so. It looks very nice to me. All that blue water." She clapped her hands. "And just look at that cute little native village!"

"Bug-infested firetrap!" snorted Wexler.

"That's not strictly true," Crawford said defensively. "Although I must admit that a number of the indigenous insects can be troublesome. On the other hand, you

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might be lucky enough to be bitten by a Varyl fly."

"Lucky?"

"Yes, it's something like an Earth mosquito, but it pays off for the blood it takes from its victims by injecting a venom which works on human beings as a euphoric hallucinogen."

Melanie Wexler uttered a little squeal. "How horrible! I just can't stand insects. And the idea of being bitten—"

"Please, there's nothing at all for you to worry about," Crawford said gallantly. "I can let you have some PC Ninety-seven tablets. If you take them you won't be bothered at all. They modify the chemical structure of human perspiration, making it repellent to most of the local insects."

"You mean they'll make me smell?" Melanie was already surrounded by an aura of expensive perfume with the strength of a force field.

"Only to the bugs," Crawford explained. "The change would be undetectable by another human being."

"I've got the feeling that this place is going to be no fun at all," said Wexler. "Why don't we just ship out of here right now?"

"I'm afraid that isn't possible," Crawford said. "Safety regulations forbid more than one transmat exposure in twenty-four Earth Standard hours per person." He could have added that in their case the regulation was particularly applicable, but there was no sense in alarming them at this stage by bringing up the subject of Scrambling.

"You mean we're stuck here for a whole day, whether we like it or not?" said Wexler.

"If you'd only give it a chance, I'm sure you'd find a great deal to interest you," said Crawford.

"Yeah?" Wexler remained unconvinced. "What do you do around here for laughs? We just came in from Beldar IV, and that's a tough act to follow. They've got a World War going there, you know, the full Flanders nineteen-eighteen bit."

"Harry went over the battlefield every day in an aircar," said Melanie.

"Well, you've got to pitch into that kind of thing if you're going to get the maximum experience," Wexler said, with a touch of pride, as if touring in a light-shielded, force-field protected aircar were the height of heroism. "Melanie just couldn't take all that blood and mud. She went on the alternative excursions, hospitals, welfare projects, that kind of woman's stuff."

CRAWFORD was relieved to hear that Melanie Wexler did not share her husband's ghoulish taste in entertainment.

"There was this convalescent home for officers. None of them

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badly disfigured, you understand. Such handsome, brave boys," Melanie said reminiscently. "So human in their needs."

Crawford pictured her, a lovely figure in white gliding through the wards, dispensing comfort and encouragement, occasionally placing a cool hand on a fevered brow. The vision faded abruptly under the impact of Harry Wexler's voice.

"I said, what have you got to offer us that will compare with Beldar IV?"

"Certainly nothing on that scale," admitted Crawford. "Life here is usually pretty quiet, apart from the spawning ceremonies in early spring—and you've missed the last of those by nearly three weeks."

"Hell. Now what kind of organization is that?" Wexler complained. "Mel and I have always been kinda interested in quaint fertility rites."

"Strictly from an anthropological point of view, you understand, Mr.—" added his wife, with a flicker of eyelashes that did things to Crawford's hormone balance.

"Crawford—Alex Crawford." She was not only beautiful, thought Crawford, she had an intellect as well. All this wasted on her overweight, stupid slob of a husband. "I'm afraid I have to do a few maintenance jobs right now—just routine, you understand. Please help yourselves to anything you want from the bar. I should be back in about a half-hour—" Babbling his excuses, face flushed with embarrassment at the thoughts that exploded into existence under the catalytic influence of Melanie Wexler's smile, Crawford made an awkward, stumbling exit through a door marked: Station Personnel Only.

Once in the safety of his own small office, he sat down at his desk and began an attempt to consider the multiple problems presented by the arrival of the Wexlers. So far neither of them was aware that this was Poligoy and not their expected destination of Aruman IV, and if Crawford were careful he might be able to preserve this ignorance until he was able to ship them on to their next destination on the following day.

But the situation was not quite as simple as that. The first question that had to be answered was how they had come to arrive at Poligoy in the first place. The reason could have been a human error back at the Beldar IV station, an error in the selection of the destination coding such things did happen occasionally.

Or, if not a human error, a minor equipment failure, perhaps? Or...

Crawford reluctantly faced the third alternative at last. Perhaps he had a Scramble on his hands. If that were the case the situation

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would be infinitely more serious. Scrambles were mercifully rare—although not quite as rare as the carefully arranged statistics appeared to show. In five years as a station operator he had not yet been involved in a Scramble situation, though it was quite possible that the law of averages had caught up with him at last. Crawford sighed deeply, the vision of Melanie Wexler's eyes, so trusting, so beautiful, rising in his memory as he opened the desk drawer and took out the red-covered book with gold lettering on its cover: Trans-universal Galactours Manual for Station Chiefs—Top Secret.

It took him only a few seconds to find the section headed Scramble.

> Scramble is a blanket term used to cover a number of different malfunctions in the process of matter transmission. Among those so included are:
>
> (A) Dead on arrival.
>
> (B) Disappearance—failure to arrive at destination.
>
> (C) Misplacement of organs or limbs.
>
> (D) Brain damage—insanity in one form or another.
>
> (E) Image reversal—subject received in mirror image of original.
>
> (F) Multiple ectyping—with or without loss of original.
>
> The above list is provided merely as a guide and makes no pretensions toward being complete. These are the commoner manifestations, some of which may appear in combination with each other. It is therefore recommended that in all cases where Scrambling is suspected the Station Chief should immediately get in touch with his Area Inspector. However, should this not be possible, the Station Chief is urged not to panic but to use his discretion until such time as contact can be made. He may do this in the confidence that his decisions will at all times be backed by the Corporation.

Crawford sometimes found himself wondering just how much that word "discretion" covered. He had an idea that it was somehow connected with the presence of the laser pistol which he had found in the bottom drawer of his desk when he took over the station. The weapon was not shown in the inventory as part of the official equipment and its presence on Poligoy was strictly illegal. But when he had mentioned the matter to Kranosky, the area inspector, he had received an enigmatically oblique reply.

"I run a clean territory, Crawford, and I shall expect you to help me keep it that way, check? Not one of my stations has ever cost the corporation a single credit in

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refunds, law suits, or out-of-court settlements. Remember that and we'll get along fine. Check? Any time you're in doubt, just shove a tape down the beam to my office and I'll be right along to back you up. Check?"

A passenger Scrambled in transit became a considerable liability to the corporation, capable of bringing a crippling law suit. There was little doubt that from a practical point of view a complete disappearance was much more favorable to the interests of the corporation than a maimed reappearance, especially because in such a case they would be able to plead an old act-of-God escape clause which absolved them from responsibility. There was no positive reference to any such practices even in the Top Secret manual, but Crawford had an uneasy suspicion that in such a situation a loyal station chief was expected to use that undefined "discretion" by taking direct action which would save the corporation the expense and embarrassment of litigation.

HE THRUST these unpleasant thoughts to the back of his mind. Such measures would surely not be necessary to deal with the situation he found himself in at the moment. The arrival of the Wexlers must be due to an operational error on Beldar, nothing more. Kranosky, a disconcertingly energetic man, built like a barrel with legs, would be able to clear the whole thing up in a few minutes. He switched on the desk recorder and began to make a taped report.

When the recording was completed he removed the cassette from the machine and hurried through into the transmat room. Placing the tape on the transmission grid, he turned his attention to the control console—and noticed for the first time the single word that appeared on the two monitor screens:

OVERLOAD OVERLOAD

The duplicated message hadn't registered before, perhaps because he had been too preoccupied with the sensation of falling into Melanie Wexler's wide blue eyes—but now as he stared dry-mouthed at the ominous red capitals the full seriousness of his position began to dawn on him at last. There could no longer be any doubt that he was faced with a Scramble situation. Any malfunction serious enough to trip the overload cutouts on the transmat clearly came into that category.

There could now be no question of getting the taped message through to Kranosky either—it could not be sent to area headquarters until the transmat was working again. And—the Manual was quite specific on this point—a station chief was forbidden to

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interfere with the internal complexities of the transmat in his charge. A Model A120 Matter Transceiver cost somewhere in the region of five million Cr. Earth, and there was no sense in allowing someone who was merely trained as an operator to fool around with a capital investment of that magnitude. This was a job for maintenance and all he could do at the moment was to activate the automatic subetheric beacon and wait for the arrival of the engineers. He had no way of knowing just how long this would take. Although subetheric was quasi-instantaneous like the transmat beam, the maintenance crew had to travel by old-fashioned spaceship.

During that time Crawford would be stuck with the Wexlers. He had no objection to spending a week in the company of Melanie but her husband was a very different matter. Crawford squared his narrow shoulders and made his way back through to the tourist section of the station.

WEXLER was in the lounge. He had obviously taken Crawford's invitation to sample the pleasures of the well-stocked bar literally, but the intake of alcohol had done nothing to improve his disposition.

"You seen that goddammed wife of mine anywhere, Croydon?" he demanded.

"Crawford."

"Crawford—schmawford, I ask you a question, you give me the answer," growled the big man, swaying precariously on the bar stool.

"I'm afraid I haven't seen the lady," said Crawford.

"You sure?" Wexler's bloodshot eyes scanned him suspiciously.

"I have been fully occupied with my duties," Crawford said. "The last time I saw Mrs. Wexler she was in here with you."

"Yeah? Well, she's not here now, is she?"

"Perhaps she's in her room," Crawford suggested. "Would you like me to check?"

"You keep outta my wife's room," said Wexler. He looked down into his almost empty glass and muttered morosely to himself, "Same damned thing every place we go—"

"Can I fix you another drink, Mr. Wexler?" Crawford said, searching for some way of reaching some reasonably amicable conversational level.

"You trying to get me stoned?"

"Not at all, Mr. Wexler. It's my job to entertain the guests and make sure they have everything they want."

"Yeah? Well at two hundred and fifty skins a day I suppose that figures," Wexler said. "But I still think that brochure is a con."

Crawford swallowed. "I wanted to talk to you about that," he said.

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After all, he had to start his explanation somewhere.

"You mean you admit it?"

"No, Mr. Wexler, the brochure is perfectly accurate. The corporation is most careful that there should be no misrepresentation. After all, our best advertisement is a satisfied client."

"Don't give me the old public relations routine, Pulford," growled Wexler. "I've been in business myself all my life. Now what's bugging you?"

"Well, the fact is that there has been a slight error," Crawford said. "Nothing at all to worry about, you understand—but for certain technical reasons which I won't bother you with at the moment, you have arrived on Poligoy—not Aruman IV, as was originally intended."

"You mean we're on the wrong planet?" exploded Wexler. "I knew those blasted frogs weren't right!"

"So you see the brochure—"

"To hell with the brochure!" shouted Wexler. "What about my two hundred and fifty a day?"

"I can guarantee that the corporation will meet you on the financial arrangements," said Crawford, hoping that his discretionary powers covered the making of such promises.

"Yeah? Well that's all very fine. But the way I see it there's been a breach of contract here," said Wexler. "The booking form distinctly says 'see up to ten planets of your choice—' and I didn't choose this dump."

"Quite so, Mr. Wexler, but I think you'll find that undertaking is qualified by a contingent liability clause to cover unavoidable changes in local conditions—"

"Don't you start quoting the small print at me, Pulford!" roared Wexler. "You and your damned corporation have robbed me of twenty-four hours' vacation time. I could have been enjoying myself on Aruman IV. Nobody does that kind of thing to Harry Wexler and gets away with it."

"That's another thing," said Crawford, deciding that he might as well let Wexler have all the bad news at one time. "I'm afraid that it looks as though you won't be able to continue your tour tomorrow, after all. The station transmat is temporarily out of commission."

"Temporarily? How long is that?"

Crawford shrugged. "If there's a maintenance crew in the area, a few days maybe. It's impossible to be definite at this stage."

"Shall I tell you something, little man?" Wexler's voice moderated suddenly to a confidential tone. "If I'm not back behind my desk at Wexler Tools and Components, Inc., by nine-thirty next Monday morning, I shall sue, claiming a million credits for each day's delay—and there isn't any court on Earth that won't grant a verdict in

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my favor." He guffawed nastily.

IF ONLY Kranosky were here, he could handle it, thought Crawford hopelessly. But Kranosky, most likely, was light-years away, blissfully unaware of the jeopardy that faced the record of his "clean territory."

"You can fix me that drink now, boy," said Wexler, rendered amiable by the anticipation of successful and highly profitable litigation. "And while you're about it, why don't you have one yourself? You look like you could use a stiffener."

Crawford mixed Wexler a Bacardi and Coke strong enough to fell an elephant and, although it was still only late afternoon, he broke his usual tradition by having a Scotch and water himself.

"May as well be comfortable," slurred Wexler, getting unsteadily off the bar stool and weaving his way toward one of the lounge's armchairs, which accepted his subsiding bulk with a moan of protest. He raised his empty glass a moment later and looked owlishly at the station chief. "Hit me again, Crawfish."

Crawford obeyed, finding some solace in the thought that one more must surely tip the already failing Wexler into a drunken stupor. He was ferrying the empty glass back to the bar counter when he happened to glance out through the observation window and see Melanie Wexler, a nymphlike vision in a diaphanous pink creation, standing on the terrace outside.

She was looking into the lounge, smiling as she waved one perfectly shaped arm in an unmistakably beckoning gesture. Crawford did a "who me?" double-take, confirmed with a look over his shoulder that Wexler was facing in the opposite direction, than hurried out to join her. After all, she was just as much a paying guest as her husband, and there would be a great deal more pleasure for himself in entertaining her.

JUST how much pleasure was something he hadn't anticipated even in his wildest dreams. He found that the beckoning depths of Melanie Wexler's wide blue eyes meant every word they didn't say.

"Oh, Alex," she sighed, smiling up at him as she afterward lay in his arms on the lawnlike grass of a clearing near the lake edge. "You're all man. Why didn't I meet you before?"

Still dazed by the after-effects of passion, Crawford was unable to think of a sensible answer but this minor shortcoming passed unnoticed as Melanie continued with her monologue.

"You have no idea what a terrible life I endure with that beast," she said, moist lips trembling kissably. "He has no idea of how to treat a woman. Most of the time he ignores me—but when he's

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drunk he's like a mad bull. My mother warned me about men like him. I never thought I'd find myself married to one—" A tiny sob shook the perfect body, and Crawford surrendered to a sudden upsurge of protective zeal.

"Oh, Alex—" The sound of his name on her lips was like a heavenly choir welcoming him once more to paradise.

When the madness finally retreated and he once more became aware of his surroundings he realized with a start that the sun had set and the stars were already peeping down out of a purple twilight. Melanie was lying completely relaxed, her face childlike in sleep. He woke her with a gentle kiss.

"Melanie, it's late," he whispered urgently. "I ought to be getting back to the station."

"Not yet, Alex," she pleaded.

"But your husband," he protested, already weakening. Her eyes were like dark pools in the dimness, drawing him down irresistibly.

It was close to midnight when they finally arrived back at the station. The lights had come on automatically with dusk and they could see the empty lounge clearly through the observation window.

"Your husband—" Crawford said again.

"Don't worry, Alex," Melanie said. "He'll be in bed, sleeping it off. Nothing's going to wake him and tomorrow he won't remember a thing that happened. Why don't we go in and have a couple of drinks, then we can eat an intimate little supper, just the two of us. Maybe later you can show me your quarters."

Marveling at his good fortune, Crawford walked arm in arm with her into the lounge.

"I'll fix the drinks," she said, moving toward the bar. "You sit down and take it easy, you gorgeous man."

"Gorgeous man, is it?" roared the unmistakable voice of Wexler.

CRAWFORD whirled to see the big man, evidently still drunk, standing unsteadily in the doorway. Wexler's right hand was holding the laser pistol Crawford had last seen in the bottom drawer of his desk.

"Damn it, Mel—every place we go you gotta get yourself involved with some jerk," complained Wexler. "This time I'm going to do something about it."

Rudely shaken from the rosy glow that remained of his idyll Crawford frantically searched his mind for some notion of what to do, his vision tunneled in on the deadly weapon. He had no experience in this kind of situation—but if Wexler pressed the trigger he would not live to benefit from the present lesson. The only vaguely applicable piece of information

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he was able to dredge up was the advice given him during his training about the use of an air of firm reasonableness when dealing with troublesome drunks or deranged persons.

Fighting against the paralyzing fear that gripped him, he moved a couple of steps toward Wexler, intending to say something like: Now see here, Harry. You've got the wrong idea about this. Why don't we talk things over sensibly like civilized men?

Unfortunately, all that came out was a squeaky: "Now see here..." Then his parched throat seized up solid.

"Harry, don't do it!" screamed Melanie. "They'll recondition you out of your mind—"

"Maybe, but it will be worth it," Wexler said with drunken determination. "I've had all of this kind of thing I can take."

Crawford watched as the deadly weapon moved slowly up until it was pointing at his chest. He closed his eyes. His body tensed awaiting a blast of energy that could not fail to kill him at this range. He waited for what seemed like an age—but, as he was familiar in the fictional sense at least with the time-dilation effect experienced by people in his present circumstances, he saw no cause for hope until he heard Wexler's voice again.

"What the hell's gone wrong with the lousy thing?" He opened his eyes. Wexler was pawing clumsily at the pistol, an expression of drunken puzzlement on his face. Crawford realized with a surge of hope that whatever gods watched over the destinies of station chiefs had decided to give him another chance to survive. But he would have to act quickly. It could be only a matter of seconds before the befuddled Wexler discovered how to release the safety catch on the laser pistol.

Crawford launched himself forward, grabbing for the hand that held the weapon. He was outclassed from the point of view of weight but he had the twin advantages of surprise and comparative sobriety. Missing his aim, he gained a grip on Wexler's forearm, at the same time kicking out with his right foot. The big man uttered a roar of pain and staggered to one side, losing his balance. With Crawford clinging, terrierlike, the two rolled to the floor of the lounge, struggling.

The next few seconds passed in a desperate blur for Crawford. He was fighting on a reflex, animal level of his nature, which he had never plumbed before. Vaguely in the background, behind the grunts and thuds of the conflict, he was aware of the counterpoint of Melanie's screams.

Next he was aware of a suddenly overpowering smell of burning flesh and the body of his opponent, who happened to be on top

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of him at the time, went limp. Crawford struggled out from under, his vision clearing gradually. He saw a neatly cauterized hole about the size of a half-credit coin in the center of Wexler's chest. Automatically, he bent down and plucked the laser pistol out of the nerveless fingers.

Something swished past him. A moment later Melanie was kneeling beside the body, wide blue eyes staring up at him accusingly.

"You killed him, you murdering swine!" she screamed. "What did you want to go and do that for?"

"I didn't *want* to. But he was trying to kill me, wasn't he?" Crawford said reasonably.

"You—who the hell are you?" she snarled, the doll-like lines of her face hardening. "I had a hundred like you, Jack, or whatever your lousy name is. But Harry was my *husband*!"

Jack, or whatever your lousy name is . . .

Alex Crawford was a gentle man, and if he had not been in such a state of shock the thing could surely never have happened. Shock—and disillusionment as he recognized the enchanting Melanie at last for what she was. But the thing that really made him tighten his finger on the trigger was that name, Jack—the ubiquitous John of whom she had known a hundred.

THE beam burned a precisely circular hole right through the center of her beautiful forehead. Luckily she fell forward, so he was not forced to look at the reproach of her dead face. Even so, he stood for a long time afterward, unable to move away from the two bodies, gripped in a nightmare of remorse.

But even remorse faded eventually and he began to consider the future. If the maintenance crew arrived and found him here with the bodies of the two Wexlers the very least he could hope for would be a discharge. After all, a station chief who had developed the habit of killing paying guests could hardly be an asset to Trans-Universal. At worst, there was always the possibility that he would have to face a murder charge. Either way, he would be forced to leave the comfortable solitude of Poligoy and return to an Earth he hated.

The alternative—there had to be an alternative . . . After all, the Wexlers had never officially arrived on Poligoy. If he could get the transmat working again just long enough to send the two bodies out on an unfocused beam they would never be picked up by another receiver and would go on traveling in the form of disseminated energy particles forever, never to be reassembled. All evidence of the crime would thus be destroyed. The loss of the

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Wexlers would be recorded as a Category B malfunction and the corporation would certainly not wish to make too much of a fuss about such a disappearance.

The problem was how to get the transmat working again. Surely it was impossible that a reasonably intelligent person could have worked around transmats for so long without picking up at least some knowledge of how they operated? His training had included nothing more technical than instruction on when to press the right buttons but he had gleaned a few hints from conversations with the maintenance crew during routine servicing. For one thing, he knew that the tolerance of the cutout circuit was set purposely low, so that normally it would be tripped by the overload before a serious Scramble situation had time to develop. Now if he could find some way of overriding the cutout circuit, just for a few seconds . . .

FOUR and a half sweating hours later the job was done to his satisfaction and the two bodies lay side by side on the transmission grid platform.

Crawford took one last regretful look at Melanie, then pressed the button that sent full power surging through the transmat, which had been on standby since the overloading of the cutout.

The two bodies disappeared with satisfying rapidity. His troubles were over. Now all that remained to be done was to switch the transmat back to standby and cover up the traces of his tampering.

Why they made so much of the technicalities involved in servicing the transmats he could not understand. After all, if a guy with only a minimum of mechanical aptitude and some common sense could . . .

Crawford's self-congratulatory monologue died abruptly as he turned away from the transmission platform. He realized his mistake as soon as he saw what was happening, but it was already far too late to do anything about it.

Before attempting a transmission he should first have cleared the transmat of the previous, uncompleted program which had been resonating in its memory banks for over twelve hours. His failure to do so had allowed a feedback circuit to develop, with one section picking up the unfocused beam transmitted by the other. And since the safety cutout was not in operation, it was delivering . . .

Crawford watched the receiving grid platform in horror. The pile of inert flesh was already some three meters high and the multiple ectypes of the bodies of Melanie and Wexler were still materializing two by two by two . . . ★

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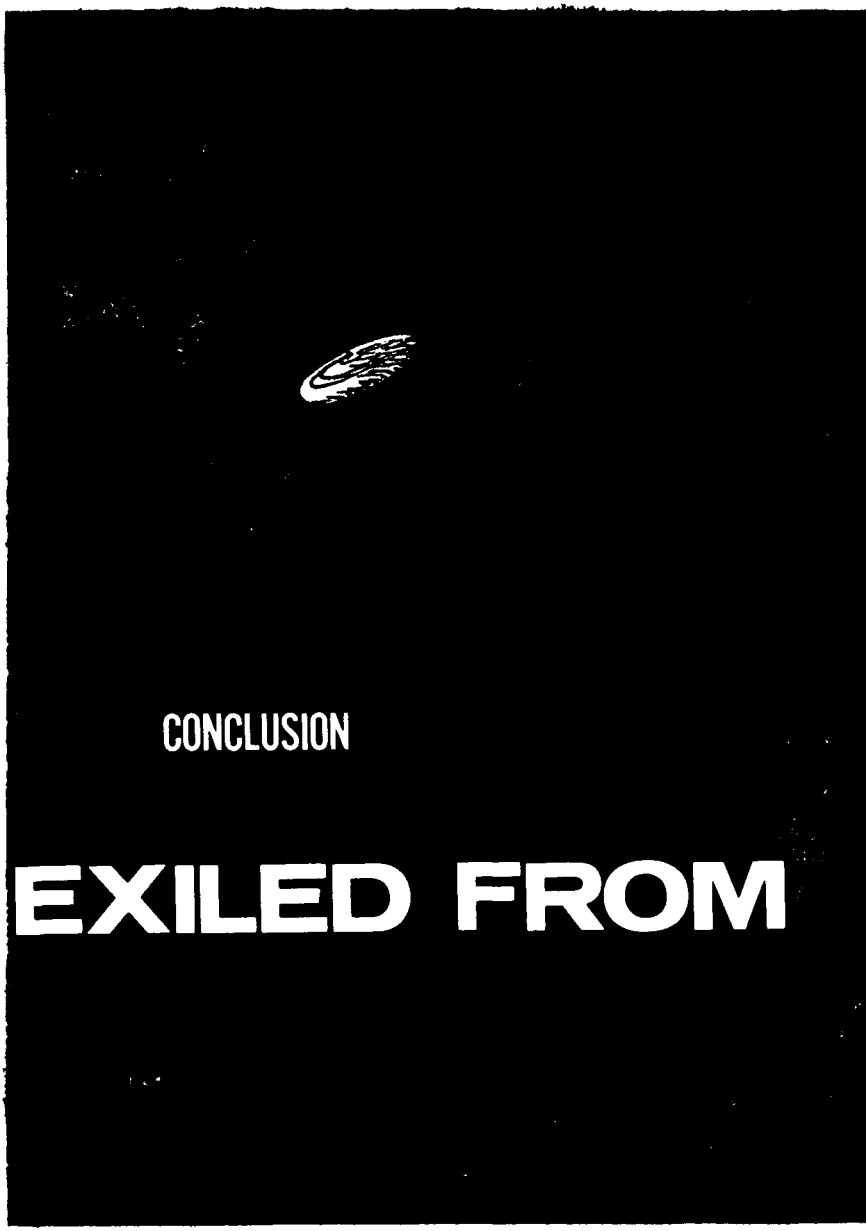

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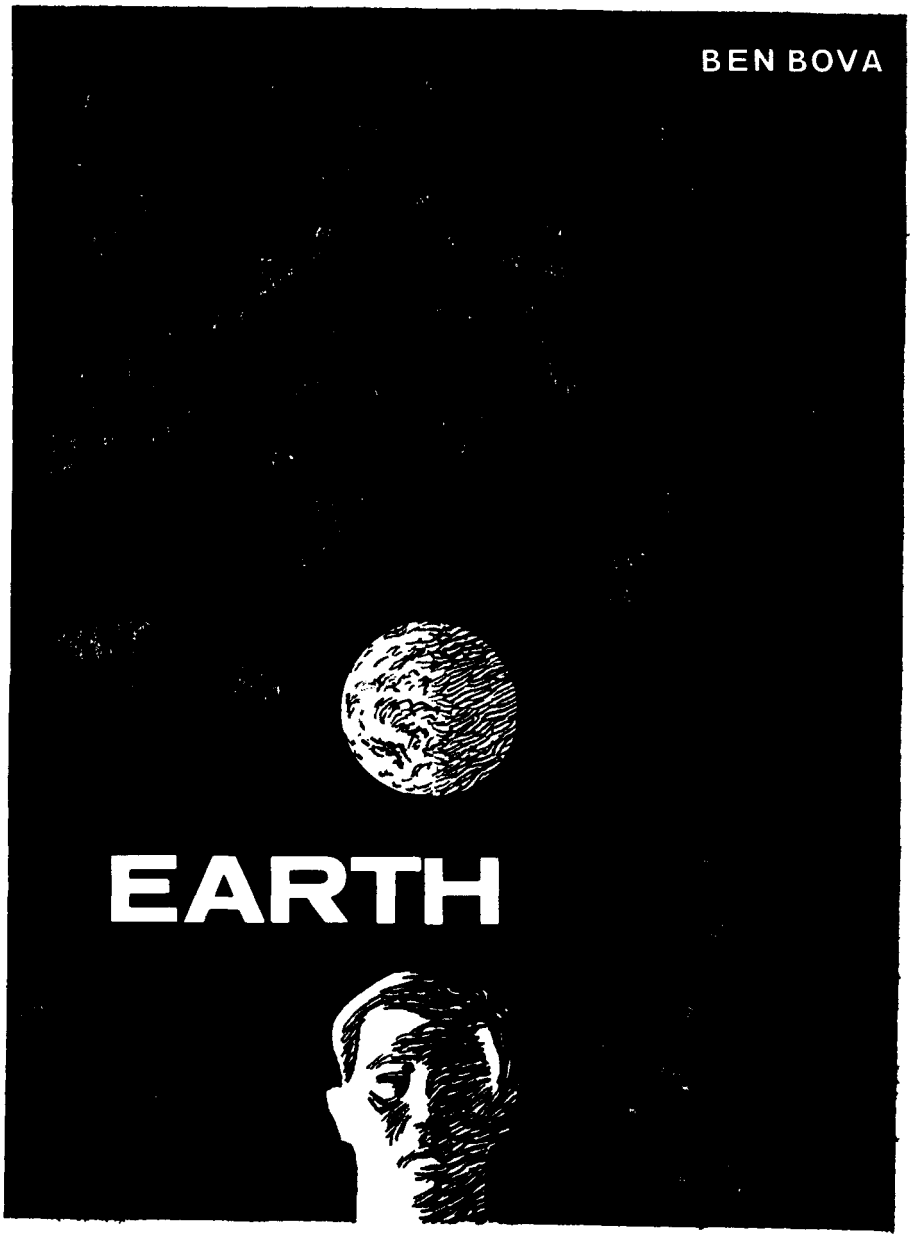

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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE: World Government has quietly kidnaped and exiled—to an orbiting satellite—Earth's leading scientists, whose work on genetics and astrophysics threatens world stability. The sentence of Lou Christopher, brilliant young computer technician—whose wizardy has made possible revolutionary breakthroughs at U.S. Genetics Institute—is, however, commuted through the machinations of a rebel element in the World Council of Ministers to a different kind of exile—on an uncharted island on Earth, where he is to coordinate continued, illegal scientific research.

Lou arranges to have his girl friend, Bonnie Sterne, brought to the island. She arrives but treats him coldly.

XIII

THERE are more than three hundred trillion cells in the human body. Counting ten cells per second, to count them all would take more than a million years. In each cell are forty-six chromosomes; under the microscope they look long and threadlike and they have often been described as "strings of beads." Each "bead" is an individual gene. Altogether there are some forty thousand genes in any human cell.

The zygote—the fertilized egg cell that develops into an embryo and within nine months into a baby—also contains about forty thousand genes. Half this number comes from each parent. Each individual gene is a complex molecular factory built of deoxyibonucleic acid (DNA), ribonucleic acids (RNA) and proteins. All the physical characteristics of the resulting baby are determined by the genes. Eye color, tooth structure, basic metabolic rate, chemical balance, size of brain, shape of nose—everything is controlled by the genes in the zygote.

Lou's work seemed simple and straightforward to him. He was training Ramo, the computer, to look over the detailed structure of each gene in a zygote and compare it to the structure of a healthy, undamaged gene.

Ramo, being a computer, knew only what his human co-workers told him. But he had two advantages that no human possessed. First, he had absolutely perfect memory. Once the "map" of a healthy gene had been stored in the microcosmic magnetic patterns of his memory bank, he would never forget it, never blur or warp it, never let any emotional conditions prevent him from seeing it exactly as it had been

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given to him. Second, Ramo could work at the speed of light—he could scan dozens of genes and spot the imperfections in their molecular structure in the time it took Lou to count to ten.

Two weeks had passed since Bonnie had come to the island. She was still as cold and distant as she had been the first day. She worked for Lou and she did her job well. She had had lunch with him most days and dinner a few times in the tiny overcrowded cafeteria that Marcus had put up near the lab complex. She had even mended a hole in his pants pocket. But she still acted more like a wary employee than a friend. She seemed to like Anton Kori—sometimes even to prefer Kori's company to Lou's.

I should have never made them bring her here. She'll never forgive me for it . . .

The phone beside Lou buzzed. He punched a button. Marcus' untanned face appeared on the main viewscreen.

"You wanted me?" he asked.

"Yes," Lou said. "Some of the biochemists have been asking me to help them program Ramo to handle their work. I don't mind helping them, but it's going to take time, and I thought you wanted me to plug ahead on the basic genetic mapping as fast as I can."

"The biochemists?" Marcus put on a worried frown. "Why do they need special programing?"

"They're working on drugs that effect the chemistry in the chromosomes."

Marcus' eyes widened but he quickly regained his self-control.

He said, "You're quite right—you shouldn't be pulled off what you're doing to help with that. Let some of the other programers help them."

Lou said, "Fine."

Marcus snapped, "If you're bothered again, refer those responsible to me."

"Okay. Thanks."

Marcus nodded and cut off the connection. Lou worked at the control desk the rest of the morning, phoned Bonnie around noon.

"I'm afraid I can't go to lunch with you, Lou," she said, unsmiling. "The girls and I are eating at our desks. We've got mountains of work to do."

HE ATE a lonely lunch, returned to Ramo. By six o'clock he was bone-tired—his back ached, his head throbbed, his eyes burned—but on the main viewscreen Ramo was displaying a detailed molecular map of the molecular structure of a single gene. And part of the map—the area of the gene that was flawed—was outlined in red.

Lou typed on the master input keyboard, GOOD WORK RAMO. PERFECT.

THANK YOU, Ramo flashed on the viewscreen.

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The phone signaled. Lou wiped Ramo from the screen and Anton Kori's lean angular face took form on it. Kori was grinning hugely.

"Can you have dinner with me?" Kori asked. "I have a lot to talk about, a lot to show you."

Lou said, "I'm kind of beat—"

"Oh?" Kori's smile faded, but only a little. "Maybe Bonnie will join me—if you have no objection. I've got to show these pictures to someone."

"Bonnie?" Lou felt his nerves flash a warning. "Um—look, Anton—I'll give Bonnie a call and we'll both drop over to your place. Okay?"

"Wonderful. Come to my lab. Next to the instrument repair shop. Bonnie knows where it is."

I've got no right to be sore at her. . .

Lou punched out Bonnie's extension. She was not in her room. He tried her office.

Her face filled the screen and his anger melted.

"Oh, hello, Lou. I was just leaving for dinner."

"Kori just called. He's very excited about something, wants us to eat with him. Can you make it?"

"Sure." Without a moment's hesitation.

Lou asked, "Would you have been so free if I had asked you to have dinner with me? Alone?"

For an instant a frightened look flickered in her green eyes. "What do you mean, Lou?"

"You've been seeing a lot of Kori, haven't you?"

"Lou, I'm a taxpaying citizen—or at least I was until I got hijacked—"

"So you *are* sore about my having you brought here."

"Of course I'm sore. Weren't you sore when they dragged you away? Do you enjoy being in exile? Is this island any better than the satellite or wherever it is that the rest of the Institute people were sent?"

"You don't want to be around me, is that it?"

She tried to smile. "Lou—whatever we had going between us back at the Institute can't be the same here. It just can't."

"That's the way you want it?"

Her smile faded and she looked sad and lonely. "That's the way it's got to be, Lou."

"Yeah." He took a deep breath. "Well, how about dinner? I told Kori we'd both be over."

"All right," she said softly. "As long as we understand each other."

He nodded, his face frozen into a bitter mask. "I understand."

He left his office, walked around the computer building and picked up Bonnie. They strod across the lab complex in silence. Tree branches overhead filtered an unbelievable sunset sky of pink, saffron and soft violet. Between the boles of the trees the sun showed huge and distended as it touched the watery horizon.

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IF BONNIE and Lou had little to say to each other, Anton Kori more than filled their silence. The moment they stepped through the door into his cluttered laboratory/workroom, he started chattering.

"It's fantastic. You'll never believe it—it's like something out of the cinema—"

He bustled around the big room, dragging a table loaded with complex electronic gear across the floor and positioning it near the door.

"Lou, would you turn on the switch for the laser?" Kori pointed to the wall over his workbench. "No, not that one—the next one—on your left. Yes."

Lou flicked the switch. He saw nothing in the room that looked like a laser but heard a hum of electric power.

"Wait till you see this—Bonnie, the lights, please. Behind you."

Bonnie turned off the overhead lights. In the darkened room Kori's bony face became eerily lit by the glow of the equipment.

"Now—just a minute while I use this old slide for focusing—

Lou found a rolling chair and pushed it toward Bonnie. She sat, and he stood beside her, facing the slightly luminescent viewscreen at the far end of the room. A slide came on, some sort of graph, with colored curves weaving across it.

"Now the focus," Kori mumbled. The graph suddenly became three-dimensional. The curves seemed to stand in the middle of the room. Lou felt he could walk around them and look at them from the other side.

"Okay, good." Kori grew so excited that his English took on a decided Slavic edge. "Now we see what no man has ever seen before—except me."

The room went totally dark for an instant—then it was filled with stars. Lou heard Bonnie gasp. He felt as if he were drifting in space looking at stars as far as the eye could reach—white, yellow, orange, red, blue—unblinking points of fire in the black depths of space. In the distance the nebulous haze of the Milky Way glowed softly.

"Wide-angle view, looking aft," Kori explained matter-of-factly. "That bright yellow star in the center is—the sun."

"These are the tapes from the *Starfarer?"* Lou asked.

"They are. It took the ship more than thirty years to reach the vicinity of Alpha Centauri. And it took more than four years just for the laser beam to carry this information back to us."

A moment of darkness and then another picture of stars.

"Wide view forward," Kori said.

A bright yellow star still occupied the center of the field of view. Kori flicked through several more holograms. The yellow star grew brighter, closer. Presently it separated into two stars.

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"Alpha Centauri," Kori said in an awed voice, as if anything louder might shatter the pictures. "Proxima is so distant and faint from its two big brothers that I haven't yet been able to pinpoint it. It's out among those background stars someplace. We need an astronomer here."

Lou shared Kori's awe. "Alpha Centauri," he echoed.

"You were right, Anton," said Bonnie. "This is fantastic—and beautiful."

"Wait, "Kori answered. "You haven't yet seen the best."

He flicked through another dozen holograms. The double star grew larger. One of the stars was smaller and redder than the big yellow sun.

"What are those two flecks near the yellow star?" Lou asked.

Kori laughed excitedly. "Flecks? Flecks indeed! Those are planets. Two planets orbiting around Alpha Centauri—"

Lou had no words. He simply stared at the screen as Kori flicked on several more holograms, closer and closer, of the two worlds. On the very last slide only one planet was in view. Its yellowish green was streaked with white clouds.

"I haven't had a chance to analyze the spectroscopic data," Kori said, "but those clouds look like water vapor to me. It's a bigger planet than Earth, probably a heavier gravity. But if there's water—there could be life!"

THE hour was late when Bonnie and Lou walked with Kori back to the dormitory. Kori stopped in the middle of the road at a spot where the trees didn't overhang. He threw back his head.

"Look at them," he said. "Millions and billions of stars. And millions and billions of planets. Some of them must be just like this Earth—and waiting for us. And we can. We can reach them and we will—" He laughed loudly, swung his long arms up toward the sky and shattered the night with a shrill whistle.

"Hey, easy—"

Kori yelled happily, "I'm drunk with joy and knowledge and power. We can reach out to new Earths. That's enough to make any man drunk."

Lou shook his head in the moonless dark. "Maybe we'll need new Earths. We've certainly fouled up this one."

Kori laughed. He was in no mood for seriousness. "Wait until the people of the world see these pictures. Wait until they realize the meaning—"

"I thought the government wasn't going to let the news out," Bonnie said.

"Marcus and Bernard will get the pictures out to the newsmen somehow, I'll bet."

Her voice came quiet but firm. "Will they? Do you really think that they intend to let the world know about this? Or about the

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genetic engineering planned here?"

Lou stopped and looked at her. In the darkness he couldn't see the expression on her face.

"What are you saying?"

For a moment Bonnie didn't reply. Then: "I'm not sure—and I could be wrong. I've just got a—well, a feeling, sort of—"

"Go on—most hunches have a reason."

"Well—why do they have Anton working on nuclear explosives? What guarantees do we have that our work will be made public? Why are the biochemists working on cerebrocortical suppressors?"

"Suppressors!"

"Uh-huh. I just found out this afternoon," Bonnie said. "That's what they need the computer time for—to select the chemical suppressor that does the best job of degrading cortical activity—permanently."

"Destroy the subject's intelligence?"

"Yes. And I think they're planning to use Big George as a guinea pig."

Lou felt a bomb go off in his guts. "No, they wouldn't—if this is true—"

"If it is—we've been tricked into working for a group of people who're planning to overthrow the government and turn half the world's people into mindless zombies."

The long silence was broken only by the night sounds of insects from the trees and brush and the distant sigh of the surf.

Finally Kori's voice came ruefully: "Well, at least I don't feel drunk any more."

XIV

IT TOOK Lou nearly a week to convince himself that Bonnie was right.

He used Ramo as his source of information and his teacher. He didn't know very much about the work the biochemists were doing. So he followed their progress by checking Ramo's programs and memory bank every evening, after his own work was finished. Within his vast memory Ramo stored most of the world's knowledge of biochemistry. So the computer became Lou's teacher, and explained patiently and with machine-like thoroughness exactly what the island's biochemists were trying to do.

By the end of the week Lou knew enough.

He sat on the warm beach sand, Bonnie on one side of him and Kori on the other. About two dozen people, most of them men and women from the technical staff, were on the beach or swimming in the gentle surf that rolled in from the reef. Far off on the horizon, huge towering cumulus clouds paraded like happy children across the sky.

The three of them sat a little bit

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away from the rest of the bathers. Bonnie was still wet from a short swim. Her skin was glistening with droplets of water, and prickled from chill. Or was it fear, in this warm afternoon? Lou noted with a kind of abstract appreciation that plenty of her skin was to be seen. She wore the briefest of swimsuits.

He kept his face serious and his voice low.

"You were right, Bonnie," he said. "The biochemists are working on suppressors. They've already produced test samples of a drug and have injected it into mice. Ramo showed me the test results. Six mice starved to death in mazes because they couldn't find their way to the food at the end of the maze. Before they had been injected, the same mice had made it through the same mazes in less than a minute."

Bonnie shivered.

Lou went on grimly: "And today they asked Ramo for the complete cortical layout on Big George. There's no doubt about it—they're going to try the drug on him."

"And then on a human being?"

Lou glanced up at her face. He nodded. "Yeah, you're right. That would be the next step."

"What do we do?" Kori wondered aloud.

Lou shrugged. "There are only two things I can think of. First, we can stop the work we're doing—just refuse to do any more. That would slow 'em down some."

"But it wouldn't stop this suppressor business at all," Bonnie pointed out.

"And they already have enough nuke bombs to destroy Messina—if they want to," Kori said.

Lou nodded and traced a square in the sand with his finger. "Okay—the only other thing we can do is wipe out Ramo."

"Blow up the computer?" Kori asked.

"No—I can just erase all his programs and memory banks. Take a little time and some tinkering—but I could do it."

"It would take more than a little time," Bonnie said. "Ramo's banks—"

"I know a few tricks I haven't shown you." Lou grinned. "I could wipe Ramo clean in a night."

"Really? That would stop everything they're doing," Kori said.

"They'd still have the bombs."

Shrugging, Kori said, "Yes, but as I told you, the bombs are small. Toys, really. Without the biological weapons they're trying to develop, the bombs by themselves wouldn't accomplish much."

Bonnie shook her head. "You're forgetting something else that they'd still have."

"What?"

"Us...or really you, Lou. If Ramo is wiped clean, don't you think Marcus is smart enough to figure out who did it?"

"Okay," Lou said evenly. "So

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he'll know I did it. What good does that do him? Ramo will still be blanked out. Marcus will be sttopped dead."

"And so will you be," Bonnie said. "He'll kill you."

"That wouldn't do him any good."

"It wouldn't do *you* any good, either," said Kori.

"Don't you see?" Bonnie said. "Killing you wouldn't help him, I admit. But I think he would do it. Doesn't that stop you from erasing Ramo?"

"It does take a lot of the fun out of the idea."

Kori said, "Wait—we've left something out of the equation. We're all assuming that we must stay on this island."

"You know a way off?" Lou asked.

"Well, there are boats every few days—"

"Can the three of us take over one of the boats? Can you navigate? Do any of us even know where this island is?"

Dismal silence.

Then Kori brightened again. "If we can't get off the island, maybe we can signal someone to bring government troops here to rescue us."

"Okay, great idea. How are you going to signal?"

"Well—there's a radio station down by the harbor."

"Yeah, and three armed guards at the door all the time. And even if we could get in and operate the radio—and make contact with somebody—we'd be dead before any government people got to this island."

Kori clasped his hands behind his head and stretched out on the sand. "Louis, My friend, I am a physicist. I have come up with a great basic idea. I admit that there are a few details to be ironed out. That's the work of engineers, not physicists."

He closed his eyes.

LOU was unable to sleep that night. He lay in his narrow bed, peering into the darkness, listening to the night sounds outside. The room's only window was open to the sea breeze. A million thoughts kept crowding in on him. No matter how he turned or punched the pillow or forced his eyes shut or tried to relax, he still found himself awake in the rumpled bed, sticky with persperation, his eyes open and jaw clenched achingly tight with tension.

Finally he admitted defeat, got up and dressed. He walked out into the darkness, down the road toward the laboratory buildings. And the computer.

He turned around the corner of the first lab building and headed toward Big George's compound. A guard drowsed at the gate. The moon was riding in and out of scudding silvery clouds but trees inside the compound made every-

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thing dark. Straining his eyes, Lou made out the bulky shape of the gorilla on a pallet of wood, straw and palm fronds. He heard a snuffle and the dark shape moved sluggishly.

"It's okay," Lou called softly. "It's me, Georgy."

The gorilla rose, pulled himself off the pallet and shuffled to the fence.

"Uncle Lou—"

"How are you, Georgy?"

"Good. I been very good."

Lou wanted to reach out and pat him but the wire fence was too fine.

"I know you've been good, Georgy. Do you like it here? Has everybody been nice to you?"

"I have lots of room to play and they feed me good. But nobody comes to play with me. I'm all alone."

"I'm sorry. I haven't been to see you as much as I should.

"But the doctor said he'd come and play with me," George whispered.

"The doctor? What doctor?"

"The doctor," George answered. "He was here today—or was it yesterday? Do you call it today if it was the day before tonight?"

"Never mind," Lou said impatiently. "What doctor? Who was he?"

"He's a new friend. He said he's going to play with me when he comes back again. And I didn't move or yell or do anything—even when he hurt me."

"What did he do to you?"

The gorilla touched the back of his head with a huge clumsy hand. "He made a funny noise back here and it hurt a little. But just a little. It feels all better now."

Spinal tap, Lou thought, his insides sinking.

"I promised I wouldn't move even if it hurt," George said.

"Georgy, listen. The doctor—he said he'd be back. When? When's he coming back?"

"Tomorrow."

Tomorrow. This morning, most likely. "Okay, Georgy, you get back to sleep now. I'll come and see you tomorrow."

"All right, Uncle Lou. Good night."

"Good night."

The gorilla shambled back toward his pallet and Lou began to know what real responsibility felt like. The only way he could save Big George would be to destroy Ramo.

He almost laughed as he stood by the wire fence in the moonlight.

Some family I've got—a gorilla and a computer. One of them is going to die. And it's up to me to choose which one.

He hesitated only for a moment before he turned and headed for the computer building.

XV

THE door to the computer building was locked. Not by a voice-

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code lock but an old-fashioned mechanical type. A set of nine buttons had to be pushed in the right combination to open it.

Lou did not know the combination.

And I'll bet Marcus has the building wired with alarms. No sense getting shot if you can't do the job you set out to do...

Suddenly he smiled.

On the other hand—if you're smart enough and quick enough there might be a way to get the job done without killing anybody...

He walked back to the dormitory, undressed and got into bed. He set his wristwatch alarm for six, closed his eyes.

He was asleep in five minutes.

He had less than three hours of sleep when he stood by the fence of George's compound again.

"Here's some fruit I saved from breakfast," he said to the gorilla. "Catch—"

He tossed a banana and two oranges over the fence. George backpedaled clumsily and managed to grab the banana in one huge hand. The oranges fell to the ground.

He stooped to pick them up, then jammed all three into his mouth.

"Thank you Uncle Lou," Big George said juicily.

Lou laughed. "You're welcome, Georgy."

A guard was walking past the lab buildings. He stopped at each door to touch out a combination on the lock. Lou talked with the gorilla for a few minutes longer, then strode briskly to the computer building. The guard was out of sight.

The rest of the technical staff was probably just getting up, Lou thought as he glanced at the control panel clock. Sliding into the seat, he immediately started typing out instructions for Ramo.

By mid-morning he found out his scheme was working. Despite the computer room's nearly arctic air-conditioning he was sweating.

The phone buzzed. The round oriental face of a biochemist appeared on the screen. He looked unhappy.

"We seem to have a problem this morning," he said without preamble.

"Really?"

"Yes. We went to run a routine check of yesterday's work and found that the data we recorded yesterday is missing from the computer's memory bank."

"Missing?" Lou shook his head. "Impossible. You're probably just searching the wrong bank."

They talked it over for nearly a half-hour. The results of yesterday's spinal tap on the gorilla, the cortical map, even some of the chemical formulas that had been stored in the computer weeks earlier—all were gone from Ramo's memory banks.

"I'll do a complete check to find

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the missing data," Lou said, "but it sounds to me like some of your people have goofed up. Running this computer isn't as simple as operating a typewriter, you know. You should have let me record your data—or at least you ought to have a trained computer programer or technician doing the job."

"They are trained technicians," the biochemist snapped.

Lou shrugged. "Then they haven't been trained well enough. Okay, I'll look for the data for you. But I'm willing to bet it was never stored properly in the first place."

The biochemist was starting to look furious. "Two months of work lost!" He lapsed into Chinese.

It took them a week to figure out what was going on. Lou had known from the start that the discovery was inevitable, that he was racing against time. He would spend his days at his own work. At the end of the day he would have Ramo review the biochemists' work for him. It took him only a few minutes to erase some of the material from Ramo's memory banks. Lou never washed out all of it—simply enough key data to void the rest.

The biochemists became a very unhappy group of people. Their chief went around screaming and purple-faced. The computer technicians who worked for them looked scared. By the end of the week Lou was spending most of his day with the technicians, trying to find out why they were unable to do their jobs properly.

At dinner with Bonnie and Kori in the noisy cafeteria Lou said to Kori, "You've got to figure out some way to get us off this island. It's only a matter of time until the biochemists figure out what's wrong with their computer programs, and then..."

"I know," Kori answered, hunching over the table and speaking as low as possible, "I've been trying to work out a star fix to find out where we are. But I'm afraid the sextant I've built isn't very accurate."

"But how do we get off the island?" Bonnie asked.

Kori shrugged. "Maybe we could build a raft—"

"Or a flying carpet," Lou said acidly.

That ended the discussion.

THE next day an armed guard showed up at the computer control room. He made directly for Lou.

"What is it?" Lou asked, tensing.

The guard said, a Malay lilt to his voice, "Mr. Marcus wishes to see you."

"I'm busy at the moment. Tell him—"

"Now," the guard said. He hitched a thumb on the holster at his hip.

Lou nodded. "Okay, just let me—"

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"Do not touch the computer controls," the guard said softly, even gently. But his hand curled around the butt of his gun.

Lou found that his own hands were suddenly trembling and well away from the controls.

"Okay, okay, but the computer's in the middle of a run."

"Some other technicians are being brought in to take care of it. You will come with me, please."

A car was waiting outside. Another guard sat at the wheel. Lou climbed in and the first guard sat beside him. In a few minutes Lou was ushered into Marcus' air-conditioned study, a small room, lined with books. A single large window overlooked the sea.

Marcus was sitting at a desk in front of the window. A few straight-backed chairs were in the room, and a comfortable-looking sofa. Marcus was talking into the viewphone on his desk. Without looking up he gestured Lou to a chair next to the desk. His face wore its usual calm expression.

Marcus said quietly to the phonescreen, "We've tracked down the source of the trouble and we'll get things back under control and on schedule."

Lou heard a voice reply, "Very well. See that you do. The timing is very critical."

"I understand. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Marcus disconnected, stared into the screen for some moments, then turned slowly to face Lou.

"You surprise me," he said.

"I do?"

Marcus almost smiled. "Let's not play games, Christopher. You've been sabotaging our computer programs, slowing down our biochemistry project. Why?"

"How did you settle on me as the villain?"

"You've been fairly obvious—we should have caught on sooner." Marcus leaned forward in his chair. "Now listen, Christopher. You're not in the States any more. You're playing in a different league—with different rules. I don't have to prove you've been screwing up the computer. I think you have, and I'm going ahead on that assumption. I called you here to find out why you're doing it and to tell you what's going to happen if you don't stop."

Lou felt anger rising up inside him. "Just like that, huh? Somebody's messing up the computer and I get blamed. What happens now? Firing squad?"

"Nothing so dramatic," Marcus answered. In a voice that sounded genuinely concerned, he said, "You know, I really think you're more worried about that gorilla than about your own skin."

"Yeah. I'm a gorilla freak."

Shaking his head like a patient father, Marcus said, "All right, play it tough if you want to. But listen to this and get it straight. We're going to take over the world

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government. Never mind who 'we' consists of. Some people in our group are very important. We're playing for the highest stakes there are and we don't intend to let you or anyone else stand in our way."

"Is that why you've got Kori making bombs?"

"Of course. Did you ever hear of a government that allowed itself to be pushed out of power without a fight? We're developing three weapons here: nuclear bombs, the cortical suppressor and genetic engineering."

Lou said, "So you can blow up your enemies, turn the survivors into morons, and then—after you've taken over—control everyone's children."

"That's pretty close."

"It doesn't sound like a very happy world that you're aiming to set up."

"No? And what kind of world do we have now? The government's letting the cities fester more and more. More and more barbarians are being born and are pushing out into the civilized parts of the world. How long do you think it'll be before a plague of rats sweeps across the whole world? Two-legged rats, from New York and Rio and Tokyo and Calcutta and Rome—every big city in the world?"

"And your answer is to bomb them out or turn them into zombies."

"If we have to," Marcus said in the tone he would use to offer a drink. "The bombs are really for fighting the government troops. Once we've taken over, we'll have other means of handling the barbarians.

Lou shook his head.

"I wish I could get through to you," Marcus insisted. "What's this government done for you? Put you in exile—you and all your friends. When we take over, you can go back to living normal, useful lives."

"Useful to whom?"

Marcus said with great earnestness, "Listen to reason, will you? You and the other scientists will be among the top people in the new society. Your children will get the best genetic care that you yourselves can provide."

"Until somebody decides he doesn't like what we're doing, or what we're thinking," Lou answered. "This government's slapped us in exile. Your friends might not be as lenient."

MARCUS sank back in his chair. "I don't have the time to argue with you. We're going ahead, and there's nothing you can do to stop us. If you don't stop tinkering with our biochemistry project you're going to get hurt."

"Let's discuss that," Lou suggested. "You need me to make the genetic engineering a success, right? And that's where the real

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jackpot is. You might be able to surprise the government and knock it off—you might be able to take over—but without genetic engineering, you'll never be able to *control* Earth. The tip-off on how your minds work is the biochemistry project. You're not planning on building a better world with better people on it. You're planning to exploit and destroy."

Marcus shook his head. "You make us sound—"

"Rotten. Filthy and rotten. And that's what you are. But you need me. I'm the key man—you told me so yourself."

"There are others—"

Lou shook his head. "You know better. Nobody—not even any one the exiled scientists—knows the complete picture as I do. And if you found someone who could be trained you'd lose at least a year, maybe two, bringing him to where I am now. I understand the whole genetic engineering problem, and there's plenty of it tucked away in my head, not in any computer banks or notebooks. Lose me and you lose that—permanently."

Marcus sighed wearily.

He said, "You still don't realize what you're up against, do you? Why do you think we went to the trouble of finding that girl friend of yours and bringing her here? We don't have to threaten you. If you're worried about what we're going to do to your precious gorilla, try to imagine what could happen to the girl. Things could get very unpleasant for her. Very unpleasant."

Lou gripped the arms of his chair hard enough to make his hands hurt. He was fighting and instinct to spring at Marcus.

"Just try to control yourself and do as you're told," Marcus said softly. "Behave—and everything will be fine for you. But keep working against me and the girl will suffer for it."

"If you hurt her I'll kill you." Lou was surprised to hear the flat metallic ring in his own voice.

Marcus did not change his expression. "Christopher, we shouldn't be threatening each other. Just do your work and neither you nor anyone else will get hurt. That's all we're asking from you. As for the gorilla—it will probably be happier at its natural intelligence level than it is now."

Lou stood up and started for the door.

"Wait a minute," Marcus called. "You haven't said—"

Lou turned. "You've got all the answers you need. There's no way for me to stop you."

Trembling with rage, he left the office, walked past the guard lounging outside the door, went out. He ignored the car still parked in front with its driver and walked back toward the dormitory.

As he passed the lab complex,

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Kori came running up to him.

"Lou, I've been looking for you everywhere—"

Lou said nothing.

"I've figured it out," Kori whispered excitedly. "How to get the government troops here. And quickly—inside a few days."

Lou shook his head. "It'll be too late."

XVI

KORI grabbed his arm and stopped him. "I'm serious. We can do it."

Lou said, "In a few days they'll have ruined Big George, maybe killed him. And if I try to stop them they'll take it out on Bonnie."

"What?"

"That's what Marcus just told me. If he doesn't like the way I behave—Bonnie'll suffer for it."

"But he can't—"

"Yes he can. And he will. I bet he'd even enjoy it."

Kori's face turned as red as the setting sun. "That pudding-faced son—I'll—"

Lou took Kori's arm. "Hold on. There's nothing we can do about it."

He felt Kori's surge of anger fade away, saw his face return to normal, except for a sullen smoldering in his eyes.

"What do we do now?" Kori asked.

"I don't know," said Lou. "What was your scheme all about? How can you signal for government troops?"

"Oh that—with the navigation satellites."

"Navigation satellites? How?"

"They have sensors on them to detect nuclear explosions."

"They what?"

Kori started walking toward the dorm again. Lou trudged along.

"It's a holdover from the old days, before the world government disarmed all the nations," Kori explained. "All the navigation satellites have a special array of sensors to watch out for nuclear explosions. If anybody sets off a bomb on the Earth's surface, in the atmosphere—or even in space—the government is alerted instantly. In a few hours there's an inspection team at the site of the explosion to find out what's going on. An armed inspection team. With troops ready to follow at an instant's notice."

"But nobody's set off a bomb for—"

"I know. But the government still has the teams—they even hold practice drills. I was an advisor to a group of new recruits two years ago."

Lou swore. "Military tradition. Idiocy dies hard."

"Don't complain," Kori said. "Now then, the bombs I've been making are stored in caves at the far end of the island. If one of them went off and a satellite spotted the blast—we would have an in-

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spection team here in a matter of hours."

"Can you set them off?"

"Them?" Kori laughed. "One will be enough. If they all go off they'll wipe out this entire island. Do you know how much destructive force even a single kiloton contains?"

At the dormitory Lou sent Kori to bring Bonnie out. He didn't want to explain matters to her inside any building. All structures here might be bugged. When Bonnie came he briefed her quickly on his session with Marcus. Even outdoors he had the feeling that they were watched. In Marcus' place, he himself would have guards out watching for trouble.

And we're going to make enough trouble to slide this island into the sea.

They ate a quick, silent dinner in the cafeteria and then walked out to the beach. Walking ankle-deep through the warm-lapping waves, with the surf booming on the reef a kilometer out, they talked over their plans as the dying red sun stretched their shadows fantastically before them.

"I'll need at least two days to round up the proper equipment," Kori was saying.

"Make it one day," Lou answered over the roar of the surf. "Big George doesn't have two days to spare."

Kori glanced at Bonnie, then looked at Lou. "We want to do this right. If we rush, something might . . . "

"One day," Lou said flatly.

Shrugging, Kori agreed. "All right. One day."

"Where can we plant the bomb without setting off all the others?" Bonnie asked.

"That's why I wanted the extra day," Kori said, "to find the best location. Probably the best thing to do is to bury it in the beach sand across the island from the storage caves. That ought to be safe enough."

"Will it make a big enough explosion for a satellite to see if you bury it?" Lou asked.

Kori laughed. "Have no fear. A few feet of sand isn't going to smother one of my toys."

"Okay."

"I'll need two things," Kori said, more seriously. "A car to carry equipment and a diversion to let me get into the storage cave and do what I must—without being stopped by the guards."

"What about the guards at the caves?" Lou asked.

"There's usually only one. I think I can handle him easily enough."

"You're sure?"

Kori drew himself up to full height. He towered several inches over Lou but he still looked spindly. "My friend, I was a national fencing champion five years ago. I still keep in good shape. Besides, I'm sneaky. I'll

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ask the guard to help me carry some of the equipment and hit him when his hands are full and his back turned."

Laughing, Bonnie said, "My hero."

"Never mind," Lou said. "Heroics are exactly what we don't need. We need good, sneaky, practical action that works. I don't want to win any moral victory; we'll all end up dead that way."

Kori nodded.

"Okay," Lou continued, "so you need a car and a diversion. We'll figure that out—shouldn't be too tough a problem. But the big question is, how do we protect Bonnie?"

"She's got to disappear," Kori said.

"Great. How do we do it?"

Silence.

They walked slowly under the purpling sky. A surge of sea curled around their ankles, ebbed away. A lone gull glided low over the waves, calling sadly, as if looking for long-vanished friends.

Finally Bonnie said, "Big George. I could stay in his compound for a day or so. There are plenty of trees and bushes to hide in and the guards never go in there."

"With the gorilla?" It was too dark to see Kori's face but his voice sounded aghast.

"We're friends," Bonnie said. "We've known each other since George was born."

"He wouldn't hurt her," Lou agreed. "Or anybody else, for that matter. Trouble is, he'd want you to play with him. You wouldn't be able to stay hidden. He'd give you away."

"Not if I explained the game to him."

Kori shook his head. "I know you think a lot of that animal, and his intelligence has been boosted. But I wouldn't plan to stay inside that fence with him for ten minutes—let alone twelve hours or more."

"Oh, you've seen too many movies," Bonnie said. "George wouldn't hurt anybody."

They went on talking, planning, arguing until stars filled the night.

"Look up there," Kori said.

His shadowy outline pointed skyward. Looking up, Lou saw one star moving silently, purposefully through the heavens, as if it had detached itself from its normal position to carry out some mission.

"Is that one of the satellites?" Bonnie's voice made a light counterpoint against the *basso* background of the surf.

Kori glanced at his luminescent wristwatch. "Yes. And right on schedule."

"Thank God," said Lou.

LOU didn't sleep much that night, and the next day at the computer building he hardly paid any attention to his work. He went

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through the motions but his mind was racing, thinking about all that had to be done.

Toward the end of the afternoon he could no longer stay cooped up in the control room. He stepped outside and took a deep breath of warm, salt-smelling air.

The quiet afternoon was shattered by the tortured scream of an animal. A scream of rage and pain and fear.

"George—"

XVII

LOU ran to the gorilla's compound. He got there in time to see two of the biochemists carrying a third through the gate. Big George was nowhere in sight. A half-dozen guards were clustered around the gate and more were arriving on the run, guns drawn.

"What happened?" Lou shouted.

They ignored him. A pair of guards took the unconscious biochemist from his co-workers. His face was bloody and one arm was hanging at a weird angle.

Lou grabbed one of the sweating scientists.

"What happened? What did you do?"

The little Oriental looked up at Lou with fear and anger in his eyes. In a nasal, heavily accented English he said, "Ape became frightened by injections. Anesthetic wore off. Restraints not strong enough. Ape broke loose, knocked down Dr. Kusawa, ran back into trees."

"Injections?" Lou demanded. "The suppressors?"

The biochemist nodded, pulled his arm out of Lou's grasp and tottered away, following the guards who were carrying his boss.

Lou went to the gate.

One of the guards started shaking his head and motioning Lou away. "No. Danger. Keep away."

"Let me in there. He won't hurt me. He is scared and hurt."

The guards were clustered around the gate, which was now firmly locked. Most of them were peering into the trees and brush. Big George was not in sight. The other guards were watching Lou.

"Danger," said the one guard to Lou. "Go away."

Slowly, reluctantly, Lou walked away.

Outside, after dinner that night, Kori said, "Everything's suddenly different. Bonnie can't stay with George now."

"Sure I can," Bonnie said. "He'll be all right by now and the guards will never dream of searching his compound. It's a better hiding place than ever."

"No," said Lou. "There's no way of telling what those injections did to him. It's too risky."

Bonnie insisted that George was all right. "Let's go down to his compound and talk to him."

Lou nodded agreement. Kori simply looked worried.

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They walked down to the gorilla's compound but stayed away from the gate where the guards stood watch. They moved up onto the slope of the hill to a spot close to the trees inside the compound.

"Georgy," Lou called out softly. "Georgy, it's me, Uncle Lou."

A snuffling grunt. From the shadows among the trees a pair of baleful eyes suddenly gleamed. Lou felt shaken. George's eyes shone tonight like a jungle beast's.

He forced his voice to stay calm. "Georgy, it's all right. It's me, Uncle Lou. And Bonnie is here too. And another friend—"

A growl.

Lou turned to Kori. "May be a good idea for you to go away, Anton. George must be scared out of his wits of strangers right now."

"He doesn't sound scared."

"He is."

Kori said stubbornly, "But I want to see the gorilla's reactions for myself. I don't want you two making any mistakes about this—"

"Shove it," Lou snapped, keeping his voice down to avoid frightening Big George. "You think you're the only one with brains? I'm not going to let Bonnie take any chances."

"Stop arguing," Bonnie said. To Kori she added: "He won't come out as long as you're here."

Kori left, muttering to himself. After another ten minutes of coaxing and soothing big George lumbered out of the trees and to the fence.

"Georgy," Lou said, gripping the fine wire mesh of the fence. "Are you okay?"

"Head—head hurts."

"It's all right, Georgy," Bonnie said. "The hurt will go away soon."

"Hurts—bad men—hurt—"

Is it just me or does his voice sound strange? Like it's hard for him to put words together?

"Georgy, don't be afraid. It's going to be all right. The bad men have gone away. They won't come back."

The gorilla merely blinked.

Bonnie said softly, "Georgy, in a little while I'm going to come and stay with you. I'll bring you lots of food and some medicine to stop the hurt.

"Hurt—scared—bad men—"

"I'll stay with you," Bonnie repeated. "And the medicine will stop the hurting. Don't be afraid."

"And I'll make sure that the bad men don't ever come back," Lou said, feeling anger welling up within him. "Not ever."

"Uncle Lou—" Big George started but his voice trailed off and he never finished the thought.

Lou said as gently as he could, "It's all right, Georgy. No one's ever going to hurt you again."

As they walked away from the compound, Bonnie put a hand on Lou's arm.

"You're shaking," she said.

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Nodding, Lou answered, "You know—last night I couldn't sleep. I was scared. Still am, I guess. We could all get killed tonight. But I think what was really scaring me the most was the thought that I might have to kill somebody myself. Or at least try to. But now—seeing what they've done to Georgy—to a harmless animal like that—I'm not shaking from fear. That's anger."

"It's all right," Bonnie said. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Do you really think you'll be okay in there with George?"

"Yes, of course. I'll bring him some candy and sedatives. He'll sleep like a baby."

Lou nodded.

"You'll see," Bonnie said. "It's all going to go like clockwork."

"Yeah." Lou glanced at his wristwatch.

X minus four hours and counting . . .

EXACTLY at eleven o'clock the trio met at the dormitory doorway. They had spent the intervening hours checking final details, then pretending to go to their separate rooms for the night. Now they started wordlessly for the lab complex. They had found identical black stretch pullovers and slacks among the disposable clothing supplies in the dorm.

There were two turbowagons on the island. One was usually parked for the night at the lab complex. The other stayed at Marcus' house.

"Do you think anybody's watching us?" Bonnie asked in a whisper as they walked along the side of the road toward the lab area, sticking to the shadows of the trees and shrubs.

Kori whispered back, "They've got guards posted at the lab complex, the gorilla's compound, the bomb storage caves and Marcus' house. Why should they watch us? We can't do any harm unless we get to one or more of those spots."

They skirted the lighted area around the complex by detouring through the trees, making a wide circle and doubling back to the far side of Big George's compound. Kori stayed back. Lou and Bonnie walked up to the fence and softly called the gorilla.

Big George lumbered up to the fence. "Hello Georgy," said Lou. "How do you feel?"

"Head—hurts—"

"I've brought some medicine to make it feel all better," Bonnie said. "And some candy for you."

They talked for a few moments more with the gorilla. Then Lou boosted Bonnie to the top of the wire fence. George reached up and grasped her around the waist, his huge hands circling her completely. He put her down inside the fence as gently as a ballet dancer handles his ballerina.

Lou watched them, his sides suddenly knotting as he realized how

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easily Big George could kill Bonnie. But she reached up and patted his massive head. As they turned and went toward the trees together Bonnie reached into the bag at her waist for some candy.

Lou checked his watch. Eleven-thirty. He hurried back to Kori. Next step: get Kori his car.

He met Kori, assured him that Bonnie was safe. They started back to the lab buildings. A lone guard patrolled slowly between the buildings. He looked bored and sleepy. But on his hip was a big pistol.

Kori looked at Lou and nodded. He stepped out of the shadows and walked straight to the guard.

"Say there," he called out, "can you help me? I'm trying to get into my lab here—there's some work I have to do—"

The guard was instantly alert. "All buildings locked. No one can enter until morning."

"Yes, I know but—"

Lou ducked around the back of the building, circled to come up behind the guard. Kori kept talking intently and the guard was resting his right hand lightly on the butt of the pistol. They were standing about ten meters from the corner of the building where Lou crouched.

Ten meters. Quickly and quietly Lou slipped off his sandals. His bare feet on the gravel sounded deafening. The guard started to turn.

Lou covered the last few meters with a flying leap and pinned the guard's arms to his sides while Kori struck him across the windpipe. He gagged and went down, thrashing, with Lou on top of him. Kori calmly leaned over, pushed Lou's face out of the way and chopped hard at the back of the guard's neck. He went limp.

Lou rose to his feet, sweaty, panting. "Is he dead?"

"I doubt it," Kori said. He went to the lab door and punched the buttons of the combination lock. The door opened and the lights went on automatically.

"See?" said Kori smiling. "No alarms. I rigged them this afternoon—at the same time I changed the lock's combination. There's some benefit to being a physicist after all."

LOU dragged the guard inside, stuffed him into a cabinet, then locked it. Meanwhile Kori filled a tool kit with the equipment he wanted.

They left the lab, relocked the door and walked to the car.

"Are you sure you can handle everything by yourself?" Lou asked as Kori slid the tool kit onto the back seat.

"If you can keep them busy at the other end of the island," Kori said. He pulled the guard's pistol out of his belt. "Here. I'll get another one from the guard at the

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storage caves. Do you know how to use it?"

"I think so."

"It's simple. Just release this catch here and it's ready to fire. Pull the trigger and it goes off. It should have at least a couple dozen charges in it. Laser pulse does as much damage as an explosive bullet—like hitting something with an ultrasonic hammer."

Lou nodded and took the gun. It felt heavy in his hand.

"Very good," Kori said. "I'll wait here until you start making noise down by the harbor."

"Right." Lou tucked the gun into his waistband, saw Kori extend his hand. He took it and said, "Good luck."

Kori grinned. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

Lou hurried through the starlit night down toward the harbor. The road passed Marcus' house, where the only other car on the island was parked. Lou looked around, saw no one, slid in behind the wheel and released the brake. The car started to roll down the slight incline.

He heard running footsteps behind him and a man's voice: "*Wei! Li tsai tso sheng mo?*"

Lou let the car glide to a stop, slid out and crouched down behind the car. A light came on at the front of the house. Two guards were standing in front of the place, staring at the car. Lou pulled out the gun and released the safety.

The guards seemed unaware of him. They walked slowly toward the car. Lou stood straight up and fired over the car. Hundreds of joules of energy were suddenly changed to invisible pulses of infrared laser light. The first guard was bowled over backward, as if hit in the chest by a giant's fist. The second spun and sprawled on his face. Neither moved once they hit the ground.

His hands shaking, Lou again set the safety and tucked the gun into his waistband. Then he forced himself to go over to the bodies and take their guns. The men were still breathing. He felt a little better as he went back to the car and tossed their guns to the front seat.

He got in behind the wheel again, turned on the car's headlights. A road ran down toward the harbor. It was time for Kori's diversion. With a deep breath, Lou turned the starter key. The turbine whined to life. Lou pressed the throttle pedal firmly down to the floor. The engine coughed, then roared. Lights went on inside the house.

He raced the engine once again, then put the car in gear and roared down the road. The shrubs and trees by the roadside blurred by, the wind tore at his face as he plunged down the twisting road toward the harbor. Lights were going on down there, too, where the guards' living quarters were.

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He came screeching out on the flat, tore into the harbor area and pulled the car to a screaming stop at the foot of the lone dock. A small boat was tied up at the end of it. The game was going to be to make it look as if he wanted to get off the island on that boat.

Men were piling out of several buildings in the darkness, shouting in languages Lou didn't understand. He went to the back of the car, lifted the engine hood and groped for the fuel feed line. He ripped it out and felt a spurt of fuel slick his fingers. Then he went back to the front seat, grabbed the two extra guns and fired several shots into the engine compartment, backpedaling onto the dock as he did so. The third shot did it; the car erupted into flames.

LOU raced down the dock, the burning car between him and anyone who wanted to come and get him. A few crates were piled on one side of the wooden dock and he ducked behind them. In front of him was the flaming turbowagon; through blurring heat waves he could see men running around the dockside area, some brandishing guns. Behind him were open water and the small boat tied up at the end of the dock.

But somebody had already thought about the boat. He heard a crunching sound, the crash of breaking glass. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a chunk of the boat's gunwale break into splinters and vapor.

He crouched behind the packing crates. Long minutes ticked by. The fire in the car died down, the boat slid over on its side, gurgling obscenely.

The shore had quieted down. Lou found it harder to see now but there must have been dozens of guards milling around during the height of the blaze. Lou knew he was trapped and that he was going to die. He realized that he had picked up a splinter in his left foot and it hurt. He wondered how Kori was doing.

Diversion—Kori needs a diversion here . . .

Squinting out into the darkness, Lou could barely make out a row of what looked like fuel drums lined up neatly on the shore near the foot of the dock. A dozen drums. Maybe fifty meters away. An easy target.

It took him five shots before one of the drums burst into flame. In an instant they all went up.

The shouting and running began all over again. Nobody was shooting at him, either. They were all running either toward the fire or away from it. Lou watched the guards. They were good, no question of it. After the first momentary shock and surprise, they fought the raging fire with hand extinguishers, blankets, anything they could find. Finally somebody trundled up with a por-

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table foam generator and they started smothering the blaze with billowing white foam. But this job took time and manpower.

The fire was smoldering and smoking when Lou heard: "Christopher! I know you're out there on the dock. Give yourself up—you can't get away."

Lou grinned. Marcus sounded neither angry nor frightened. Not even very upset. That meant that he didn't realize what Kori was up to—or that Bonnie was hidden.

Or he's got Kori and Bonnie and the whole game's lost . . .

Marcus called: "Christopher, I don't want to have you killed. You can't get away. We know you're behind those packing crates. We—"

Suddenly the voice stopped.

Lou risked a look. Marcus was listening to a guard who was gesturing and pointing up the road, toward the other end of the island.

"So the three of you are in on this together." Marcus' voice was a little edgier now. "All right, we'll just find the other two and bring them out here. You can watch what happens to them."

"Marcus," Lou called out.

Everyone at dockside froze. It was nearly dawn—clammy gray light made the shore visible.

"Marcus, did you ever stop to think of what a good target you make?"

Marcus jerked a step backward.

"No, don't move," Lou called. "Don't any of you move. If anybody twitches, you'll get it, Marcus. I mean it."

Marcus stood frozen at dockside. He was out in the open, the nearest guard a meter or so away, the nearest cover the burned-out hulk of the car, at least ten meters away. Lou prayed that none of them knew how many shots it would take him to hit anything at this distance.

"Christopher, you can't get away with this."

Lou grinned. "Can't I?"

As if in answer the packing crate in front of him exploded in a deafening blast and a shower of splinters. Lou felt himself soaring, slow-motion, tumbling off the dock. The shore careened wildly and the water rushed up toward him. As he hit the water and lost consciousness his last thought was that some rifleman had missed his head by just about a centimeter.

XVIII

PAIN woke him. It would have been pleasanter to stay asleep, unconscious, oblivious to everything. He hurt everywhere as if knives were being twisted under his skin.

His eyes were gummy when he tried to open them. Everything was blurred, out of focus. A gray expanse of ceiling hung over him. And faces. He tried to raise his

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head but somebody pushed him back onto the pillow.

"He's conscious," said a voice.

Marcus' face slid into view. Still calm. But was that perspiration beading his brow?

"That was a foolish bit of nonsense," Marcus said without rancor. "What have you done with the girl? And where's Dr. Kori?"

Lou found the strength to shake his head.

"It's a small island, Christopher. We'll find them sooner or later."

"Not before—" he croaked.

"Before what?" Marcus asked.

"Nothing."

Marcus leaned closer. "We can find out. You can't keep any secrets from us."

"Go ahead and torture me."

"Don't be an ass," Marcus said. "There are drugs that will make you tell us anything we have to know."

"No—"

Somewhere beyond Lou's vision a door opened and footsteps came quickly toward his bed. A voice muttered something, too low for Lou to hear.

"What?" Marcus snapped. "Why wasn't I told sooner? When did—" Marcus' face slid into view again. It was red now. With anger? Or fear? Lou smiled. "Where's Dr. Kori? What's he doing with a bomb?"

"Planting it in your lunch."

Lou saw Marcus' hand blur toward him but he could not move out of the way. It stung and snapped his head to one side. He tasted blood.

"Get him talking. And quickly," Marcus ordered.

Someone grabbed at his arm. It flamed agony. Lou saw it was red and sore with thousands of splinters. An expressionless Chinese doctor took his arm from the guard, held it gently, swabbed a relatively undamaged spot on the underside of the arm, then pressed a pneumatic syringe into the area. He put Lou's arm back down on the bed carefully, looked at his wristwatch.

"The reaction should take a few minutes," the doctor told Marcus.

Marcus paced the room nervously. The doctor stood beside the bed, patiently watching Lou. What time was it? How much more time did Kori need?

Somebody giggled. Lou was startled to realize that the sound came from himself.

The doctor turned toward Marcus. "He should be ready now."

Marcus came to the bed and leaned over Lou. "All right, Christopher. Where is Dr. Kori and what's he doing with the bomb he stole?"

"Playing in the sand,," Lou said, laughing. It was funny, everything was so funny. Marcus' face, the thought of Kori's digging sand castles with a nuclear bomb tucked

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under his arm. The whole deal was uproarious.

"Listen to me," Marcus said, his face red and sweaty. "Quickly, before—"

The flash of light was bright enough to feel on your skin. For an instant everything stopped, etched in the pitiless white light. No sound, no voices, no movement. Then the bed lifted. The window blew in, showering glass. A woman screamed and a roar of ten thousand demons overpowered every other sensation.

Somebody fell across Lou's bed. The roar died away, leaving his ears aching. People started to move again through a dusty plaster haze, crunching glass underfoot. Marcus staggered up from the bed.

Lou heard somebody say in an awed voice, "Look at that—a real mushroom cloud, just like in the history books."

Again Lou heard his own laughter. "You've lost, Marcus. You might as well admit it. There'll be a government inspection team here in a matter of hours. Followed by troops, if you want to fight. It's all over. You've lost."

"I can still kill you—and the girl—"

Lou was laughing uncontrollably now. *The drug*, he knew in the back of his mind. But there was nothing he could do to stop himself.

"Sure, kill me. Kill everybody. That's going to help you a lot. An enormous lot."

He laughed until he passed out again.

IT WAS pleasant to be unconscious. How did he know? *Or am I dead?* He floated in darkness, without pain, without anxiety. The darkness was warm. After a long while it began to turn gray. The gray brightened slowly. Bonnie's face appeared in it.

Tears glinted her eyes, on her cheeks.

Oh Lou . . .

Had she spoken? He wanted to say something, to touch her, to make her stop crying. But he could not move. Did he still have a body. Her face faded, vanished.

He began to hear voices. Strange faces peered at him. Blackness closed in again.

Abruptly he opened his eyes and everything was in sharp focus. He was lying in a hospital bed. The walls of the room were pastel blue. The ceiling was clean white. Viewscreens and camera eyes ogled him from the ceiling. He found that he could turn his head. The movement hurt but was manageable. There was a window at his left. Sunshine was pouring in. A night table stood next to his bed.

He tried sitting up. The bed followed his motion with an almost inaudible hum from an

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electric motor. Leaning back in a half-sitting position, he suddenly felt dizzy.

At least I'm not dead . . .

His body felt stiff. Looking down, he saw that his hands and arms were wrapped in bandages. So was his chest; white plastic spray from windpipe to naval. His face felt raw, as if shaved with a dull blade.

The door suddenly opened and a nurse appeared.

"Good morning," she said with professional cheeriness. "Though it's later, really."

"Hello." Lou's voice was hoarse. His throat felt rough.

The nurse must have been pushing forty, Lou thought. She still looked pretty good, though.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He considered the question for a moment. "Hungry."

She smiled. "Good. That's one condition that the automatic monitors still can't record."

She was gone before Lou could say anything or ask any questions.

Within minutes a food tray slid out of the wall and swung over to the bed. Lou had barely finished eating when a knock came on the door and it opened wide enough for Kori to stick in his head.

"Hi. They told me you were finally awake."

LOU'S voice felt and sounded better. "Come on in. How are you? Where are we? What happened? Where's Bonnie?"

Kori grinned and pulled up a chair. He sat down.

"Bonnie's fine. She's here in the hospital, too, getting treated for radiation dosage. There was a considerable amount of fallout from my little toy, you know. I stayed inside a cave until the government troops arrived—but even I got a touch of it."

"Marcus and the others? What happened to them?"

"They gave up without much fight," Kori said. "A government inspection team 'coptered to the island in four hours and eleven minutes after the blast. In another two hours a little army of government troops covered every square centimenter of the island."

"And what happened to me?" Lou asked. "I remember trying to hold them down at the dock. Then somebody shot at me and I fell into the water. Then—"

Kori was trying not to grin.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, forgive me, but you are. Do you know how they found you?"

Lou shook his head.

"You were lying flat on your back in one of the bedrooms of Marcus' house. Stark naked. Sixty million splinters all over your face and body and arms and legs. And you were laughing your head off."

"Very funny," Lou said. "Marcus had me shot full of

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happy-juice, so I'd tell him where you were. So he could find you and kill you."

"I know," Kori said.

"Is Bonnie going to be all right?" Lou asked.

"Oh yes, certainly. She'll be visiting you herself in a day or so."

"And Marcus and his crew?"

Kori shrugged. "In jail, I suppose. The troops took them away." His face sobered. "One bad thing, Lou. Big George is dead."

"What?"

"Somebody shot him. We don't know who did it. It might have been Marcus' guards or the government troops. Bonnie was right there and she couldn't tell who fired the shot."

"Killed him? But why?"

Shaking his head, Kori answered, "We'll never know. There was a little fighting when the troops landed. Maybe it was just a stray shot. Or perhaps someone got frightened at the sight of the gorilla. At least he didn't suffer at all. One shot—he died instantly."

For a long moment neither of them said anything. Then Lou asked, "Where are we, anyway?"

Kori's face didn't cheer up at all. "Back where we started. In Messina. It looks to me like we're going to be shipped up to the satellite as soon as you and Bonnie are well enough to travel. To begin our exile."

XIX

THE doctors made Lou stay in bed for a week. He saw Bonnie and Kori almost daily. But mostly he had time to think. So much happened in so short a time. Now he could think about it, look back on it and try to fit all the fragments together, to form a coherent picture of what had suddenly happened to him and his life.

We didn't do right by you, Georgy . . .

The future seemed bleak, though Kori was more optimistic.

"After all we've done for the government," Kori said one afternoon, at Lou's bedside, "risking our lives to stop Bernard's attempt at a coup— They won't exile us. They'll give us medals. You should get an award anyway—you've set a new international record for splinters."

Lou grinned but remained pessimistic. Too, he sensed something new and different about Bonnie. She was uptight, holding back something.

One afternoon he asked her, "What's bothering you?"

"Does it show?"

He nodded.

"I've got to make a decision," Bonnie said. Her green eyes looked troubled, sad.

"About Kori and me?"

"In a way. You see, Lou, I'm not officially on the list of exiled persons. I can go back to Albuquerque

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if I want to. Or I can go with the rest of you to the satellite."

"And stay for the rest of your life."

"Yes."

He took a deep breath. She was staring at him, trying to read his face, looking for something and evidently not finding it.

He said, "You might never be allowed to make the decision. You're in pretty deep with us now. The government might decide to exile you along with Kori and me."

Bonnie stopped, right there in the corridor. "They can't do that—they wouldn't"

"They might," Lou said. "And if they do, it'll be my fault."

"There you are—I've been looking all over for you two—" Kori ran down the corridor, dodging between frowning nurses and muttering patients. Breathlessly he told Lou and Bonnie, "The General Chairman—he's asked to see us. To talk to us. Tomorrow morning. The General Chairman!"

Lou turned to Bonnie. For the first time, he felt hope. If not for himself, at least for her.

DESPITE his anger at what had been done to him and skepticism about the future Lou felt awed when the three of them were ushered into the General Chairman's office. Bonnie and Kori, he saw, were also wide-eyed and silent.

The office covered the entire top floor of the tallest tower in Messina, stretching from the elevators to the sun-bright window-wall where the Chairman's ornate desk stood.

"Come in—come," said the little man behind that desk, in a voice cracked with age.

They walked silently across the thick carpeting, past a ten-foot globe showing the Earth in color and relief, complete with networks of tiny satellites orbiting around it. The globe hung in mid-air, suspended magnetically.

"Forgive my not rising," the Chairman said. "I suffered a stroke recently and the doctors want me to exert myself as little as possible." His voice was soft, gentle, friendly, with an undistinguished Brazilian accent. He was small, slight, his bony face high domed and haloed with wisps of white hair. His hands were fragile. He was very old. His skin was white and powdery looking, etched with a network of fine wrinkles. "However, I did very much want to meet the three of you. Please sit, make yourselves comfortable. Would you like anything to drink? To eat?"

Lou shook his head. He chose a seat between Bonnie and Kori, facing the chairman.

Silence fell.

Before it could become awkward the Chairman said, "I want to express my personal thanks for

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your courageous actions on the island. You prevented an uprising that might have taken many lives."

"We did what we had to," Lou said.

The Chairman nodded. "It must have been quite a temptation, though, to put in with Bernard's people and avoid going into exile."

Shrugging, Lou answered, "As far as I'm concerned that island was exile. There was no difference between the way the government has treated us and the way Bernard's people were treating us—until the end."

Kori said, "I think we all felt, though, that the people running the island would be worse than the people running this government, if they got the chance."

The Chairman said, with a smile, "Thank you. It's good to know that we are not completely at the bottom of the list."

Kori grinned back at the old man.

Lou felt irritated. "From what you've said it sounds like the exile is still in effect and that we're going to be shipped out to the satellite."

The Chairman's face grew somber. "Yes, I am sorry to say. If anything, this attempt by Minister Bernard to seize power proves the wisdom of the exile. Your work on genetic engineering has a political potential that is simply too powerful not to be dangerous."

"So we spend the rest of our lives in a berryllium jail?"

"What else can we do?" The Chairman waved his frail hands helplessly. "We are not monsters. We have no desire to make you suffer. We will supply you with everything you desire aboard the satellite. Anything—"

"Except freedom," Lou snapped.

"TRUE," said the Chairman. But now there was a hint of steel behind the softness of his voice. "Yet many on Earth suffer more than you will—and if I must choose between the welfare of twenty billions and that of two thousand or so—I will choose the twenty billions. The mere hint that you might soon be able to control human genetics has already triggered one attempt at revolution. I will not see world society destroyed."

"But what about Kori? The work of the rocket scientists doesn't really threaten the world."

"Perhaps not," the Chairman admitted. "I must confess that I didn't realize anyone except those working on genetic engineering had been sentenced to exile. Someone in the bureaucracy considers the starship scientists a threat to world stability. I must find out why. If they cannot convince me that you are a threat, Dr. Kori, then you will be released from exile and freed to resume your normal life. Also any of your colleagues who have been placed in

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exile—they, too, may be freed."

Lou asked, "And Miss Sterne—what about her?"

Bonnie murmured, "Lou, you shouldn't—"

Lou persisted: "I want to find out about this. Miss Sterne was not sentenced to exile. She was brought to the island by Marcus who wanted to use her as a lever to keep me in line. She was the first of us to discover what was going on. Now where does she stand? Is she going to be shipped off with the rest of us"

The Chairman said, "Miss Sterne is not a scientist nor an engineer. There is no reason for her to be exiled—unless she wishes to accompany you for personal reasons."

"You can really say that with a straight face?" Lou raged. "You can sit there and promise her freedom when you know you don't mean it?"

"Lou, what are you saying? Bonnie reached out for his arm.

The Chairman's eyes narrowed. "Explain yourself, Mr. Christopher. Why do you call me a liar?"

Almost trembling, Lou said, "If you let Bonnie go, if you let Kori go, what's to stop them from telling the newsmen about this exile business? What's to stop them from telling the whole world? Will you want them to sign a pledge of silence or will you do surgery on their brains? Because we both know you can't risk having them tell the world about what you've done to the scientists . . . "

"Why not?" the Chairman asked gently.

"Because the people of the world will demand that you release us. They'll want our work to continue—they'll want us free. You can't throw two thousand of the world's top scientists into prison and—"

The Chairman silenced Lou with an upraised hand. "My brave, impetuous young man, you are completely wrong about so many things. First, I do not lie. When I offer Miss Sterne her freedom and raise the possibility of freedom for Dr. Kori, I am not lying. Please do me the honor of granting me honest motives. Next, the people of the world already know about your exile. We have not kept it secret. There would be no way to do so, even if we desired to. You cannot whisk away so many prominent men without anyone knowing it."

"They know?"

"Of course. And they do not care. Do you think that the teeming billions of Earth care about a handful of scientists and engineers?" The Chairman shook his head. "No, they care about food, about jobs, about living space, about recreation and procreation."

"But our work—I thought—" Lou felt as if he were in a glider that was spinning out of control.

"Ah, yes, your work," the

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Chairman said. "I admit that if you were on Earth and *showing* the world, step by step, what could be done—through control of genes then there would soon be an enormous demand for your efforts. Catastrophic reaction. Everyone would want his next child made perfect. I confess that our public information experts have tried to make it sound as if your work would show results in the next century rather than next week. Of course, having you all out of the way has made the job that much easier."

"And—nobody cares?"

The Chairman looked truly sad. "The people are quite accustomed to talk of scientific miracles. Rarely do they see such miracles come true."

"But the food they eat, weather control, medicines, space expeditions—"

"All part of the normal, everyday background," said the Chairman. "Once a miracle comes true, it quickly becomes a commonplace. And the masses seldom connect today's commonplaces with tomorrow's miracles. The promise of genetic engineering does not excite most people. Grasping politicians, yes—hungry workers and farmers, no."

"So the progress we worked for is over—completely finished—won't happen. No way around it?"

"I am afraid so. I have lived with this problem for more than a year now, trying to find some alternative to what we're doing to you. I am sorry. Somewhere we have failed. We build gleaming technologies to turn ourselves into devils." The Chairman shook his head. "I am ashamed of myself, of the government, of the entire society. We are doing you a dreadful injustice."

"But you're going ahead and doing it."

"Yes."

A dismal silence ensued.

Finally the Chairman said, "As I told you, I will personally examine the matter of the rocket scientists. Dr. Kori, I cannot promise you your freedom—but I do promise to try."

Kori nodded and tried to look grateful but, glancing sidelong at Lou, not too happy.

"And Miss Sterne," the Chairman went on, "you are free to go whenever you wish. The government will furnish you with transportation back to your home—or anywhere else you may desire to go. You will be reimbursed for the troubles that you've been put to, of course."

Bonnie said, "Sir? Would it be possible for me to go to the satellite? On a temporary basis?"

Lou stared at her.

"Most of my friends are there," Bonnie said, looking straight at the Chairman and avoiding Lou's eyes. "Maybe I'd rather live there than anywhere else. But I can't tell

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you—until I've tried it for a while."

The Chairman folded his hands on his thin chest and gazed thoughtfully at Bonnie.

"How do you think the others will feel, knowing that you can return to Earth anytime you wish to?"

"I would only stay for a few weeks. I'd be willing to make a final decision then."

A small smile worked its way across the Chairman's wrinkled face. "I can picture Kobryn's reaction. Highly irregular. But—very well, you may have a few weeks aboard the satellite. But no more."

"Thank you, Bonnie said.

She turned smiling to Lou.

XX

THE satellite was literally another world. Lou had not seen it from the outside. He, Bonnie and Kori had been brought in a shuttle rocket that had no viewports in the cargo/passenger module. They had shared accommodations with cylinders of gas, packing crates of foodstuffs, motors, pumps, furniture. Lou swore he had heard, through an airlock that connected to a second cargo module, the bleatings of goats or sheep.

The satellite was huge and provided a strange environment. For one thing, one always walked uphill. The corridors curved uphill in both directions, because the satellite was built in a series of giant wheels, one within another. Most of the living quarters were in the largest, outermost wheel, where the spin force almost equaled the full gravity of Earth's surface. No extra physical effort was required to walk along the constantly uphill corridors because the spin-induced gravity did not fight one. But Lou immediately resented the looks of the thing, hated it.

His compartment—or room—was a marvel of compactness, plastic trimmed with aluminum spray paint. Lou thought of it as a cell. An astronaut would feel comfortable in it; a scientist on duty in a satellite for a month would put up with it—Lou realized he would be living in it for the rest of his life.

Edmond Dantes has a bigger cell than this.

Life had already settled into something of a dull routine in the plastic little world. Lou, Kori and Bonnie were met by a greeting committee when they stepped through the airlock from the shuttle rocket. They were shown to their quarters. After he had unpacked his lone travelbag, Lou received a phone call from Mrs. Kaufman, who was acting as her husband's secretary now, asking him to meet with the Director's Council right after breakfast the following "morning."

Time, of course, was completely

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arbitrary aboard the satellite. So everyone ran on the same clock, set on Universal Time. When it was midnight in Greenwhich, England, it was midnight aboard the satellite.

Lou spent his first "evening" prowling through the uphill corridors. He was unable to find Bonnie, didn't know where her quarters were or what her phone number was. Same thing for Kori. He could have asked someone—instead he started walking along the main corridor. It was completely featureless. The bare plastic walls were broken only by bare plastic doors—all alike, except for tiny room numbers on them.

Other people were drifting through the corridors, most of them strangers. A few were men and women with whom he had worked at the Institute. They nodded recognition or mumbled a hello. If they were surprised to see him, or wondered why they hadn't seen him before this, they failed to show it in any way. All Lou could see in their faces was a vague guilt, a shame at being locked up here.

The living dead . . .

PERIODICALLY Lou came to spiral steps that led to the next wheel, closer to the hub of the slowly spinning satellite. After passing several of them Lou decided to explore one.

The steps ended in another curving corridor, much like the first one, but smaller, narrower, with doors on one side only. Lou had expected the gravity to be less on this second level but he could detect no difference. Which meant that the satellite must be much larger than he had envisioned it.

As he walked aimlessly along the corridor he came to a section that was dimly lit. Only a few dull red light panels overhead broke the darkness. Ahead of him Lou saw a motionless figure.

"Greg? Hey Greg?"

Greg Belsen jerked, startled, then turned.

"Greg," Lou said, smiling and reaching out to grab his friend's shoulder. "Boy am I glad to see you!"

"Hello, Lou," Greg said quietly. "I heard they finally got you here."

Lou's smile vanished. This was not the same Greg he had known at the Institute. The nerve had been taken out of him. Then he saw why Greg had been standing at this spot.

There was a viewpoint in the wall—a small circular port of heavily-tinted plastiglass. Outside it hung the Earth. Rich, blue, laced with dazzling white clouds, beckoningly close, alive. It was swinging around in a slow circle, the reflex of the satellite's spinning motion.

"She's only a few hundred kilometers away," Greg said in a soft flat voice that Lou had never heard

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from him before. "Less than the distance between Albuquerque and Los Angeles. You could go to one of the airlocks and practically jump back home."

Lou's blood ran cold.

LOU finally met Bonnie and Kori again the following morning, after a fitful, tossing few hours of dream-filled sleep. They all arrived at the autocafeteria-restaurant at about the same time and found each other at the "menu"—a wall panel studded with selector buttons. Only the breakfast buttons were lit. The cafeteria could seat perhaps fifty people, at long narrow tables. It was nearly empty.

"No morning rush to work, at least," Kori said, trying to sound cheerful.

When neither Bonnie nor Lou answered him he shrugged, turned to the selector panel.

"Are you supposed to meet with Kaufman and the Council this morning?" Lou asked Bonnie.

Kori answered, "Yes, at nine-thirty—" while Bonnie shook her head.

Surprised, Lou asked Kori, "You are? But you're not from the Institute—why would Kaufman want you to report to him?"

"Your Dr. Kaufman has been elected head of this colony," Kori answered. "Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't. I thought Professor DeVreis—"

Kori said, "DeVreis died of a heart attack on his first day here."

"Oh."

Curiously, Lou felt as if someone close to him had died. He had hardly known DeVreis, but for a man who had lived such a rich and useful life to be tossed into exile, to die here, in this place, seemed unfair.

Kori turned back to the selector panel and tapped buttons for orange juice, eggs, muffins, sausage and coffee. Almost immediately a part of the panel slid back to reveal a steaming tray bearing his order.

"Well," he said, "at least the food looks good."

Turning to Bonnie, Lou asked again, "Kaufman hasn't sent word to you?"

She shook her head. "No, nobody's said anything about my meeting with the Council. I guess they're going to ignore me unless I decide to stay permanently."

Lou agreed. "Well, I'm supposed to see them at nine."

He was a few minutes late. It took him longer than he had expected to find Dr. Kaufman's office, which was in the second wheel.

It was a long and narrow room, just long enough to have a slight curve to the floor. Kaufman's desk was at one end, a long conference table at the other. All the furniture was made of plastic and light metals; it all looked temporary and cheap.

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Kaufman sat at the head of the table. He had lost weight, Lou saw. There were new lines in his still proudly handsome face. His thick hair seemed a shade whiter than it had been at the Institute. Greg Belsen, Kurtz, Sutherland and two strangers filled all but one of the remaining chairs. Lou took the last chair, at the end of the table.

After introducing the two new faces—representatives from labs in Europe—Dr. Kaufman said, "We're all trying to accustom ourselves to our new environment. Our reason for meeting with you this morning, Christopher, is to ask you to select some sort of project for your working hours."

"Project?"

"Yes," said Dr. Kaufman. "I don't believe that we should sit around and do nothing. The government won't let us have the major types of facilities that we need for our old work."

"There's no computer aboard?"

Greg laughed. "No computer, Lou. No big toys for any of us. No electron microscopes, no ultracentrifuges, no microsurgery equipment—nothing but early twentieth-century stuff: optical microscopes and Bunsen burners, the kinds of things you buy kids for Christmas."

Lou felt his lips press into a grim tight line.

Dr. Sutherland explained, "The government doesn't want us to do anything more on genetic engineering. Even here. They're afraid that if we start making progress again we'll smuggle the information back to Earth. And that's exactly what they don't want."

"What are we supposed to do up here? Decay?"

"Nothing of the sort," Kaufman said, waving his hand in a negative gesture. "We may not have modern equipment but we can still do good science. We'll simply have to be more ingenious, more inventive—make do with the simple equipment that we're allowed to have."

"For instance," Ron Kurtz said, leaning forward on the fragile-looking table, "I've never had the time really to write up all the work I've done over the last three-four years. I've published a few little notes in the journals—but now I can sit back and write up everything carefully, the way it ought to be done."

To be published where? Lou asked silently. *In the chronicles of wasted time?*

"It's quite clear that we won't be able to make any further progress in genetic engineering," Kaufman said, taking charge of the discussion once again. "At least we won't be able to follow our previous research, which required large-scale equipment. So we're all trying to evolve ideas for useful work in a field that can be handled with the laboratory

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equipment that we now have. We'd like you to think about what you can do and how you can do it."

A COMPUTER engineer without a computer. Lou thought of Greg's elaborate lab back at the Institute and its millions of dollars worth of automated chemical analysis equipment.

No wonder he's ready to jump ship . . .

Aloud, he said, "Okay—I'll try to think up something." He started to get up from the table.

"Oh, yes," Kaufman added. "You must have some very interesting tales to tell about your adventures over the past several weeks. Maybe you'd be good enough to tell the whole population, tonight, over our closed-circuit Tri-V system."

That caught Lou by surprise. "Well, I don't know—"

"Of course you will," Kaufman said.

The discussion was ended.

Lou stood awkwardly for a moment. The others started to get up. He turned and headed for the door.

As he stepped out into the corridor, Greg said from just behind him; "Don't get up tight about being a Tri-V performer, buddy."

Lou turned to him. "Easy for you to say."

Greg put an arm around Lou's shoulder and they started up the corridor together. "Don't worry, pal. All you'll have to do is sit down with me and one or two other guys and we'll talk. That's all. You won't even know the camera's on you. It's simple."

"My big chance in show business."

Greg's smile was touched with sadness. "Listen, we're all going a little crazy for something to do, something to talk about. It hasn't been easy, suddenly finding yourself cooped up in this squirrel cage."

They were heading toward the dimly lit section of the corridor where the viewport was.

Lou asked, "And what's your scientific research project for the next fifty years?"

"You don't want to see a grown man cry, do you? Weren't those guys pathetic in there? They're talking about redoing Calvin's work on photosynthesis or writing their memoirs. Lord, they're just going to fill in some time before they curl up their toes and die."

"That would be very patriotic of them," Lou said. "The government would be awfully pleased if we all just passed away without a fuss. It's exactly what they want down there."

"Hmp."

They were in the darkened part of the corridor now. Greg stopped in front of the viewport. There was Earth, swinging slowly, majestically, in rhythm to the satellite's spin.

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"That's what makes it hard," Greg said, staring. "Seeing her out there. Knowing she's only a few hundred kilometers away—"

Lou grabbed his arm. "Come on, snap out of it. Let's get some coffee. You going back in to talk with Kori? He's due to see the Council at nine-thirty."

Pulling himself away from the viewport, Greg said, "I know, but I'm not going back in there. Those guys are looking more like a mortician's convention every day. I think I'm going to go crazy—and soon, too."

Lou tried to laugh at him, gave up.

THE rest of the day was empty. Lou spent it prowling through the satellite's different levels, the wheels within wheels. He found a fairly decent library, a tiny auditorium, some small telescopes and other astronomical gear scattered here and there. An extensive hydroponic garden ran all the way around one of the smaller, innermost rings. The big event of the day was watching a shuttle rocket link up to the satellite's main airlock at the zero-gravity hub and unload fresh food and medical supplies.

He called Bonnie for dinner and they went together to the restaurant.

"Do you know where Kori is?" Bonnie asked as they put their trays down on a table.

Lou shook his head. "And I'm not going to look for him. I'd like to have you to myself for once."

She smiled at him.

They ate with very little conversation.

Finally, as he toyed with a gelatin dessert, Lou burst out: "God, this is awful. Depressing. It's just terrible—how in the name of sanity are we supposed to stand it? To spend the rest of our lives like this?"

She reached out to touch his hand. "Lou—people are staring at you."

"Bonnie, get out of here. Tell them you want to get off on the next rocket. Don't stay. Get out while you can."

"It does look bad, Lou," she said quietly, trying to tone him down. "But it'll get better. I know it will. Right now everybody's still in shock. Nobody's used to this yet. It'll get better."

"No. It's going to get worse. I can feel it. Everybody's totally hopeless. There's no purpose to their lives—and all these lives, especially these, were built on purpose."

"They'll adjust," Bonnie said. "So will we."

"We?"

Just then Kori came striding into the restaurant and spotted them. He ambled over to their table, smiling broadly.

"I've been looking everywhere for you."

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Lou snapped, "How can you be so cheerful?"

Kori shrugged. "Well, I have good news for you. Greg Belsen said you'd be glad to hear it. But if you don't want me to tell you—"

"All right, sit down, wise guy." Despite himself Lou was grinning back at Kori. "Now tell me the good news. I could use some."

"Well—the shuttle rocket today brought my holograms. The ones from *Starfarer*. Dr. Kaufman said I could show them tonight and you won't have to talk about your adventures after all."

"Great," Lou said. "Best news I've heard all day."

"Greg said you'd be pleased."

Lou walked Bonnie back to her quarters, while Kori went to find the special compartment that had been set up as a Tri-V studio.

"You can't stay here," Lou told her as they walked down the corridor. "I won't let you."

"But I can't go back to Earth and know that you and Kori and the others are trapped here. I just can't, Lou."

"Do you think it'll make me feel any better to know you're staying here because you feel sorry for me?"

They were at her door now. "I don't know," Bonnie said. "It's a lousy deal no matter how you look at it."

Lou nodded agreement.

"Would you like to come in and watch Kori's show?"

"Sure I tried watching Tri-V shows beamed up from Earth for a while this afternoon. It kind of hurt—comedies and love stories and newscasts—all happening where there are cities and trees and mountains, winds and—"

"Stop it." Bonnie put her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder. "I know it hurts, Lou. I know."

A loudspeaker set into the ceiling broke in: "Tonight's special showing of photographs from the *Starfarer* mission will begin in five minutes."

Bonnie straightened, looked briefly into Lou's eyes, then turned to open her door.

They sat side by side on the sofabed, the only comfortable piece of furniture in the cramped compartment, and watched the viewscreen set into the wall. They listened to Kori's voice explaining what the pictures showed, watched the stars, the myriad stars. They saw Alpha Centauri again and focused on the fat yellow-green planet with its ice-white clouds.

Suddenly Lou was on his feet, shouting, "The stars! That's the way out! The stars!"

He felt as if someone had just lifted a heavy mask from his eyes.

Bonnie was standing beside him, her eyes wide with bewilderment. "Lou, what is it? What's wrong?"

He grabbed her, lifted her off her feet and kissed her.

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"The stars, Bonnie! That's our escape, that's our purpose. Instead of staying here in exile, we can leave. Head for the stars. We can turn this prison into mankind's first starship—"

XXI

"PATENTLY impossible," said Dr. Kaufman.

Lou was standing at the end of the conference table in Kaufman's office. Kori sat at his side. The members of the Council showed a spectrum of emotions from thoughtful skepticism to outright scorn.

"This is the most ridiculous suggestion I've ever heard," Kaufman continued.

Lou held on to his steaming temper. "Why do you say that? The scheme is physically possible."

"To turn this entire satellite into a starship? Accelerate it to the kind of velocity that *Starfarer* reached—or even more? Nonsense."

Kori said, "With the kind of fusion engines we now know how to build we could accelerate this pinwheel to reach Alpha Centauri in less time than it took *Starfarer*. After all, the *Starfarer* was launched nearly two generations ago, it's a primitive ship compared to what we can do now."

"But your own pictures showed that Alpha Centauri's planets are not enough like Earth to serve as a new home for us," said Mettler, one of the Europeans on Kaufman's Council.

"You're missing the point," Lou countered. "The important thing is that Alpha Centauri has planets. Barnard's Star has planets—they've been detected from Earth. Seven of the nearest ten stars are known to have planets; one of them is bound to be enough like Earth to suit us."

"Yes, I know. But it might take you a century or two to find a fully Earthlike planet."

"Let me ask something else," Charles Sutherland said in his nasal whine. "Have you thought about the structural stresses on this satellite when you hook a fusion drive engine to it?"

Kori answered, "I've done some rough calculations. It doesn't look too bad. I'd need a computer to do the job properly, of course."

"And there's no computer here," Sutherland said, grinning sardonically. "And the government won't give us one. Neither will they give us fusion engines. So the whole scheme is meaningless."

"I think they *would* give us anything we asked for," Lou said, "if they knew they'd be getting rid of us. Permanently."

"Oh it'll be permanent, all right. One way or the other," Sutherland said.

Kaufman frowned. "By asking for permission to try such a stunt we'd be telling the government

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that we've given up all hope of ever being reinstated on Earth. We'd be admitting that we expect to be exiled for the rest of our lives."

"Don't you expect to be here for the rest of your life?" Kurtz asked.

"No!" Kaufman slapped the table with the flat of his hand. "I have friends who are working right now to end this nonsense. I'm sure they are. And I'm sure that they must be making some headway. And so do the other leaders from the other laboratories around the world. The government can't keep this farce going forever."

Lou shook his head. "I've talked with the Chairman himself. There's no doubt in his mind that we're here to stay."

"He's a feeble old man. He'll be replaced soon."

"By Kobryn," said Mettler. "Who is not going to hand out any pardons."

Greg Belsen turned to Kori. "You really think you can do it? Get us out to the stars?"

"Of course. It's only a question of getting the right equipment and support from Earth."

"And finding the right planet," Lou added.

"The planet needn't be exactly like Earth," Greg mused. "We could modify our children genetically—so they're physically adapted to the conditions on their new world."

"But the rest of us could never live on that world," Kaufman said.

"Mmm—well," Greg said, "it's just a thought. We'd still be able to make a homeworld for the children, even if we couldn't find one exactly suited for us. I think it's worth the gamble. Let's try it. If nothing else, it'll give us something substantial to work on."

"Until the government refuses to give you what you need," Kaufman muttered.

"Let's vote on it," Greg suggested.

"Now wait," said Kaufman. "Before there's any voting—"

But three hands were already in the air: Greg's, Ron Kurtz's and Mettler's. With a shrug, Tracy, the other European on the Council, added his hand. Only Kaufman and Sutherland were opposed.

Kaufman snorted. "All right. We'll look into it. Dr. Kori, you may ask your colleagues to help you with the rocketry and astronautics."

From the tone of his voice it was clear that Kaufman expected the older rocket scientists to regard Kori as a madman.

SOME of them did. They shook their heads and walked away from Kori, unbelieving. But a few accepted the idea. More as an amusement, perhaps, than as a real possibility. But they toyed with the notion, started jotting down notes, equations. Within a week the handful of rocket scien-

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tists and engineers aboard the satellite were all hard at work, no matter how implausible some of them thought the scheme to be. They soon took over all the desktop calculators in the satellite, watching the numbers flickering fluorescently in the viewscreens, getting more enthusiastic each day.

Greg Belsen was eager from the beginning. He started looking into the possibilities of deep-freezing people, putting them into suspended animation in cryogenic sleeping units. It had been done on Earth—in rare medical emergencies—for a few days at a time. Greg wanted to put most of the satellite's seven thousand people into cryogenic sleep for decades.

"Either most of the people are going to sleep most of the time," he told Lou, "or we have to rebuild this ship into a gingerbread house. Do you have any idea of how many megatons of food seven thousand people can eat in a century or so?"

Gradually some of the other biochemists started working with Greg. Even a few of the geneticists let themselves be dragged into the problem, although it was well out of their field.

Within a month Lou was asking a very suspicious government computer expert for time on high-speed computers. After a week of checking with Earth-bound scientists and government officials, the computer man allowed Lou to establish direct radio and TV contact with a huge government computer in Australia.

"They're double-checking everything we do," Lou told Bonnie, "to make sure we're not slipping in any work on genetic engineering. Slows us down—but we're getting there just the same. Kori says he can't see anything to stop us. If we can get the engines built and the radiation screens—other equipment, that is."

Bonnie nodded. If Lou had really looked closely at her he would have noticed that even though she tried, she couldn't manage a smile.

It took six months before they were certain. Six months of hectic work, calculations, conferences that lasted all hours, arguments, cajolings. Six months in which Lou saw Bonnie maybe twice or three times a week, sometimes not that often. And always he talked of the work, the plans, the hopes. And she said nothing.

Abruptly Lou was telling Kaufman, "There's no doubt about it. We can turn this jail into a starship. We can freeze most of the people. We can reach the stars. Now we have to get the government to give us the equipment we need."

Kaufman said reluctantly, "I'll ask for a conference with the proper authorities."

Shaking his head, Lou

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countered, "The General Chairman once told me that if we needed anything we could ask him. I'm going to call him. Directly."

LOU stood in the General Chairman's office again, Bonnie and Kori beside him, as the elevator doors sighed shut. The room was unchanged. The Chairman called to them from his desk. The past six months aboard the satellite suddenly seemed like a remote and unpleasant dream.

Did we actually live aboard that plastic prison? In that artificial little world? After a drive from the rocket field, through the green farmlands and bone-white villages, through the scented winds and steady call of the surf, through the noisy, crowded, living city—the satellite seemed totally unreal.

The Chairman listened patiently to their story, nodding and rocking in his big leather chair, steepling his fingers from time to time, even smiling once or twice.

For a long moment after Lou finished talking, the Chairman said nothing.

Finally: "Your ingenuity amazes me in a way. Yet I am not truly surprised that you have come up with an amazing idea." He looked at all three of them in turn. "I will not presume to comment on why you want to leave our world entirely. I suppose that a purposeful death among the stars can be preferable to a long life of exile." He laughed softly to himself. "I never expected that man's first attempt to reach the stars would be made under these conditions."

"Then you'll let us go?" Lou asked eagerly. "You'll help us, give us the engines?"

The Chairman silenced him with a gesture. "You mentioned that many among you are opposed to this idea—many who do not wish to fly toward the stars."

"Yes," Lou admitted. "Our work to date has simply shown that it's physically possible for us to make the journey. Dr. Kaufman and many of the others—especially the older people—don't want any part of it."

The Chairman sighed. "You realize, of course, that it all comes down to a question of money. Everything does, it seems. Sooner or later. It will take billions to outfit your satellite for a journey to the stars—"

"We've computed that," Lou said. "It's expensive, but still cheaper than keeping us in orbit indefinitely. This way, you pay one big bill and we're gone. If you keep us, you'll have to feed us, doctor us—"

"I feel like Pharaoh arguing against Moses," the Chairman complained. "I would be perfectly willing to spend what must be spent and help you on your way, if that is what you wish. But what of those of you who don't wish it?"

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"We'll have to vote on it," Lou said.

"Yes," said the Chairman. "I suppose you will."

They left the Chairman's office, went down the whispering elevator and into the car that took them back through the semi-tropical seaside farms of Sicily and toward the rocket field. But now the grass and sunshine and cottages were cruelties, sadistic reminders that the satellite was real and permanent and they were only visitors in this beautiful world—their prison awaited them.

They rode in the back of the open turbocar in silence. A second car followed at a discrete distance and somewhere overhead a helicopter droned lazily. They were prisoners, no doubt of it.

As they got close enough to the rocket field to see the stubby shuttles standing in a row, Bonnie turned to Lou.

"You shouldn't have brought me with you today, Lou. You shouldn't have."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not as strong as you are," she said, shouting over the wind and turbine whine. "I can't leave all this permanently. It's bad enough in the satellite, when you can see the Earth outside the viewports. But to leave forever—to go out into that blackness—Lou, I can't do it. If they vote for going to the stars I'll come back to Earth."

"But I thought—"

"I'm sorry, Lou. I can't help it. I checked this morning. The government will still let me return, if I want to. I can't leave Earth forever, Lou. I just can't."

She put her head down and cried.

XXII

LOU sat tensely in front of the Tri-V cameras. Next to him sat Dr. Kaufman. They were in the special compartment that had been turned into a Tri-V studio. Everyone in the satellite was watching and listening as they explained their positions on Lou's starship proposal.

While Dr. Kaufman spoke in his vigorous, emphatic manner, driving home points with accusatory thrusts of a stubby forefinger, Lou's mind was far away.

He kept seeing Bonnie's stricken face when she admitted that she would never go with him to the stars. Kept seeing the green countryside, the lemon orchards and vinyards, the safe blue sky and friendly sea that he would never visit again.

I can't leave Earth forever, Lou. I just can't . . .

Can I? Can any of us turn our backs on a billion years of evolution? Is that what I want them to do? Is it what I want to do?

Dr. Kaufman was saying, "It is desperately important that we all

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realize exactly what is involved here. No one has ever built a manned starship. No one has even attempted to. You all know that we get supplies from Earth regularly. Even though we have closed-cycle air and water systems, we still need replenishments of air and water at least once a month. As long as we remain in orbit around the Earth we can get those supplies and replenishments whenever we need them. But if we leave Earth, if we try this foolhardy scheme for going to the stars, we must have air and water and food systems that are absolutely foolproof. Now, I realize that manned missions to Jupiter and Saturn have used closed-cycle systems and they've worked quite well for periods of up to six years. But this star-roving we're talking about will take decades. Perhaps a century or more. Why, none of us are even sure that a truly Earthlike planet exists out among the stars."

Kaufman shook his head, making a lock of his gray mane tumble over his forehead. "No, this star-roving idea is too risky even on purely technical grounds. We just don't know how to build a starship. And even if the best engineers on Earth were assigned by the government to help us, we wouldn't be able to keep the ship in working order, once we left Earth. We wouldn't be able to repair it and maintain it. How many engineers are there among us? A handful. We're research scientists, not greasemonkeys."

Lou was listening with only half his mind. The other half was remorselessly reminding him: *Life is ruled by the laws of thermodynamics, just as all physical processes are. You can't get anything without paying the price. Not anything. If you want the stars, you must leave Bonnie behind. If you want Bonnie, the price is perpetual imprisonment.*

What's the difference? Would it be any better pushing his beryllium nuthouse toward the stars? We're all going to spend our lives inside this shell, wherever it's going.

Don't try to cop out. Heading for the stars gives everybody an aim, a purpose. Staying here is riding an orbital merry-go-round for the rest of your life, without hope, without anything but that big blue world hanging in front of your eyes, reminding you every minute of what's been taken away . . .

"And remember," Kaufman was saying, "that as long as we stay in our present orbit there's always the chance that the government will have a change of heart, that we'll be freed. Once we break away, once we start out for the stars, there can be no turning back. The step is irrevocable. None of us will live to see us reach our destination. Our children will age and die aboard this vehicle. Perhaps

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our grandchildren may find a world they can live on. Perhaps. That's a very thin hope on which to hang the lives of every man, woman, and child among us."

KAUFMAN stopped talking. He turned expectantly to Lou.

Suddenly Lou's mouth felt dry and sticky. The cameras were on him now. It was his turn to speak. Should he try to convince them or toss the whole idea away?

He looked past Kaufman's handsome features to the big electronic board that had been jury-rigged along the far wall of the studio. There was a light for every person aboard the satellite aged fifteen or over. When Lou finished speaking, they would all vote. A green light would show for each yes vote; a red one for each vote against the starship idea.

Greg had briefed him moments before the debate had begun.

We fought like kamikazes to get them to drop the age limit down to fifteen. After all, those kids are going to spend more of their lives in this pickle jar than any of us will . . .

Lou heard himself clear his throat. He shifted uneasily in the chair.

Then he said, "Dr. Kaufman has pointed out some of the technical risks in trying to reach the stars. He's perfectly right. It is dangerous. Nobody's done it before. I don't know—nobody knows—if we can make the engines and air pumps and water recyclers work for a century or more without fail."

He hesitated a moment. "Dr. Kaufman also told you that if we stay in orbit around Earth, there's always the chance that we might win a reprieve. We might regain our freedom and be allowed to return to Earth and take up normal lives again. That's also true. It could happen."

Again he stopped, but only for the span of a heartbeat. Only long enough to call silently, agonizingly, *Bonnie . . . Bonnie . . .*

Then: "When I first came aboard this satellite Dr. Kaufman asked me to go on Tri-V and tell you something about what had happened to me. I'm going to do that now."

And he told them. He told them about the Federal agent in Charleston and his ride to New York. Told them about the man's unhappiness at missing his family picnic. Told them of his night in New York, the gangs, the knives, the running, the terror. Told them how the Institute looked, emptied of everyone but Big George. Of his arrest, his arrival in Messina, his audience with Minister Bernard. He told them of the island, of Marcus, of what they planned to do, how they wanted to use genetic engineering and the offshoots of their biochemistry as weapons alongside an arsenal of nuclear

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bombs. He told them of what happened to Big George and what had been in store for all mankind.

Finally he told them of the gently implacable General Chairman, who admitted that the exile was a horrible injustice, but could see no other course of action. And the people, the great masses of people, the twenty billions of people for whom they were being sacrificed, the people who knew of their exile but didn't care.

"This is the world we've been exiled from. A world where a few people can destroy the lives of the best scientists on the planet, along with the lives of their families. A world where savages rule the cities and civilized monsters battle to control the government."

He turned toward Kaufman. "This is the world you want to go back to. So let's assume that we're allowed to go back. Let's assume that the government changes its mind and frees us. What will they do with our work? Can we trust them to use our knowledge? Can we trust them in any way? What's to stop them from exiling us again? Or quietly having us killed? Nobody gives a damn about us. All the rulers of Earth will ever want is the power that our knowledge can give them. The *kindest* thing they were able to do was to exile us!"

Looking directly into the cameras, he added: "We have no one to turn to but ourselves. The choice is ours. We can orbit this planet, slowly dying, and hope that someday the government will allow us to return. But do we really want to return? I don't. I've seen that world down there and despite all its beauty I don't want to return to it. In this universe, with all its stars and space, there's got to be someplace where we can make a better world for ourselves and our children. I say we should go to the stars."

He collapsed into his chair, feeling weak and trembling inside. Then the lights caught his eye. The vote shocked him: the green lights overwhelmed the few red ones.

Somewhere behind the cameras people were laughing and clapping their hands. Somebody whistled shrilly. A door opened and Lou saw Kori and Greg heading toward him, grinning.

Lou knew that Bonnie was in her compartment. Packed and ready to leave. She was probably past tears now. Crying wouldn't help any more. The pain wouldn't be eased by tears, or words, or regrets.

"You're making a terrible mistake," Kaufman said, shaking his head. "Everything we need and desire is here, and you're going to force us to turn our backs on it all. You're making us leave our homes and head out into emptiness. There's nothing out there for us, Christopher. Nothing!"

Nothing, Lou thought. *Except the universe.* ★

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